STOP THE BNP

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WHY THE BNP MUST BE CONFRONTED

The decision of the British National Party to field over 600 local council election candidates this summer is causing panic among the main parties. For most party ward organisations this will be their first encounter with the BNP. How they decide to deal with the fascists will have a major impact on the overall result. Nick Lowles reports.

Around the country a growing number of local politicians are scratching their heads. The British National Party is active in their area and they are not quite sure how to respond. Their inclination is to disregard them as irrelevant fascists but they hear worrying stories of BNP support on the doorstep. They denounce the BNP in the media but are met with a barrage of angry letters.

For some strange reason many local politicians of all parties seem incapable of responding to the BNP. Worried about being caught wrong-footed, they often simply ignore the fascists' presence in the hope that they will just go away. They won't and by the time the politicians finally react it will often be too late.
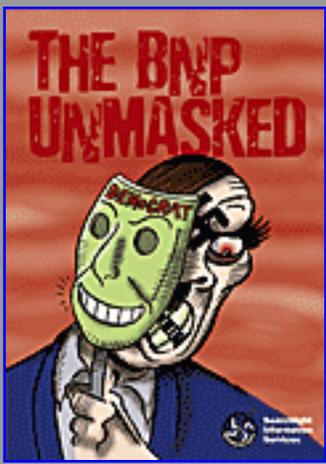
Travelling the country I often hear the argument that talking about the BNP merely gives them the oxygen of publicity. This is a regularly held view but quite wrong. The BNP is quite capable of creating its own publicity with or without the help of the main political parties. In Burnley, where the BNP has seven councillors, the other parties have until recently largely ignored the BNP in their leaflets and campaigning. In Broxbourne and more recently Thurrock the BNP won council victories with little reference to them in their opponents' leaflets. Obviously the way you talk about the BNP may not always be helpful but ignoring them does not mean that they will disappear. In fact, quite the reverse. Silence just encourages them.

The BNP relies on spreading myths to win popular support. Left unchallenged these myths become local facts. *The Ritchie Report* into the Oldham riots reported how many white people believed certain myths that had been deliberately spread by the BNP. The report criticised the council for not intervening early on to nip these myths in the bud.

More recently, in a council by-election in Calderdale the BNP tried to claim that old people were being thrown off GP lists and having their operations cancelled to make way for asylum seekers. In Birmingham, the BNP alleged

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that a local church was being replaced by a mosque. All these claims turned out to be groundless but unless rival candidates take on the BNP lies then people will believe them.

This is not to argue that political parties must ignore their own positive agendas, in fact far from it. The BNP cannot be beaten by demonising them alone. For the BNP to be beaten someone else needs to win and this requires parties to push their own agendas in a way that complements exposing the BNP.

Some of the best anti-BNP campaigns have been run in Oldham by the Liberal Democrats and Labour. In each case their campaign literature combined attacking the BNP, opposing the other party (Lib Dems opposing Labour and vice versa) and promoting themselves.

It is a proven fact that running a campaign against the BNP can boost your own election chances, especially if your party is best placed to beat the BNP. Recent by-elections have shown that there is a sizeable number of voters who will turn out to stop the BNP. Some will vote tactically for the party best placed to beat the BNP. There was plenty of anecdotal evidence of Labour voters switching to the Lib Dems in the Mixenden by-election in Calderdale to keep out the BNP last October. The following month some Tories even switched to Labour in the Failsworth East by-election because Labour was best placed to beat the BNP.

Of course these anti-BNP voters will only turn out if they are encouraged to do so by the other political parties. However fed up some voters may be with the mainstream parties, stopping the BNP is a moral issue for which they will stand up to be counted.

Running a strong anti-BNP campaign can also increase the activism of your own members. What better reason to get active than to stop the fascist BNP. Oldham Labour Party used this tactic to great effect back in 2002 as a way to mobilise its disillusioned supporters. Membership and activism rose sharply as dormant Labour Party members saw stopping the BNP as a genuine reason to get active again.

Horses for courses

If we accept that the BNP cannot be ignored the next question is how do we take them on? Searchlight believes that we need a flexible approach. What works in one area might not work in another. In one council authority the obvious strategy will be to expose the criminality of the local BNP but this

will not work in another area where voters do not perceive the BNP as criminals and thugs.

Searchlight's exposé of an Oldham BNP leafleting organiser as a gang rapist has left the BNP with a serious image problem in the town. Coupled with further revelations about the criminality of other BNP members, it is sensible for the anti-BNP campaign there to focus on crime.

Over in Burnley the BNP is not perceived as a band of criminals and so continually talking about their criminality simply will not have the desired effect on voters. However, the BNP councillors there have performed abysmally and this is the obvious line of attack.

Some people argue that because the BNP has transformed its image we should not call it "fascist" or even "racist". We have to accept, this line of reasoning goes, that the voter does not see a Nazi in the smartly dressed BNP candidate who comes to their door and so we must change our approach.

This is a very dangerous path to follow. Firstly it takes the BNP changes at face value and secondly it falls into the BNP normalisation trap.

It is quite true that under Nick Griffin's leadership the BNP has transformed its public image and there is a gap between our view of the BNP and that of ordinary voters. However, it is only the public image that has changed. The BNP is run by the very same people who only a few years ago proudly condemned Jews for brainwashing our minds through their control of the media. It is led by the very same people who denied the Holocaust happened. And it is led by the very same people who advocated violence against their opponents.

Of course people's attitudes can change but it is ridiculous to believe that every single BNP leader has experienced an overnight conversion. The change in its public image is merely a stunt to appear respectable. Even the BNP realise that the vast majority of British people reject their hardline views. By appearing more moderate they can reach out to wider audiences.

Griffin admitted as much during a speech in the US a few years ago. Defending himself from charges that he was diluting his politics Griffin explained that it was a short-term political tactic. Pointing to his white skin he reassured the audience that defending his race was all that was important.

The BNP in public is not the BNP in private. The behaviour of even their most respectable branches behind closed doors would shock most voters. It is here, away from the glare of the media and the voters, that the real BNP emerges.

In fact, it is precisely because there is a gap between the voter's perception of the BNP and the reality that we must expose it for what it really is By accepting that the BNP has changed we are only adding to its normalisation. By treating the BNP as just another political party, albeit on the right of politics, we are giving the fascists the political credibility they crave.

Why is the BNP is so desperate to force the media to soften their reporting of the party? Why does it threaten journalists and editors with legal action and complaints when they describe the BNP as "nazi" or "fascist"? The BNP know that as long as people view them as fascist many voters will be put off. If they can neutralise the reporting they will have achieved a degree of respectability.

The same goes for the political parties.

Of course, calling every BNP candidate a jackbooted Nazi is not only ineffective but can also be counter-productive. Saying that your BNP candidate has a secret plan to build concentration camps is plainly stupid.

But there are imaginative ways of linking the BNP to its Nazi roots that will connect with voters. "War hero slams BNP" was the headline on one anti-BNP leaflet in a recent election. The story was about a former Spitfire pilot who likened the modern BNP with the Nazis he fought during the Second World War. Who is going to stand up and call him a liar? Certainly not the BNP.

We must also avoid preaching at voters from ivory towers. The BNP is attracting the support of voters disillusioned with the main political parties. Lining up politicians to moralise against the BNP will at best fail and at worst harden voters' support for the BNP.

Instead the political parties must find the voters' own peers to stand up against the BNP. We need to find people who are respected in the communities and people who are not identifiable with party politics. Politicians, like anti-racist and anti-fascist activists, need to eat some humble pie. Whatever the merits of our arguments the likes of the Spitfire pilot and the community nurse will always be taken more seriously.

However, we represent the majority and if we can mobilise this majority effectively against the BNP then we have a chance. Part of that mobilisation has to be with the political parties standing up to the BNP. The day the BNP becomes seen as just another political party is the day we have lost. The BNP needs to be confronted in a flexible and sensible way. More importantly, we need to expose the BNP for what they are in a way that voters understand.

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