



BNP BROUGHT SHAME ON BURNLEY

The British National Party was left with only six of its original eight councillors in Burnley after Maureen Stowe left the fascist party in March and turned against her former comrades. Councillor Stowe, who will remain on the council as an independent, claimed she was unaware of the real nature of BNP policies when she was elected in May 2003. Matthew Collins interviewed Cllr Stowe for Searchlight.

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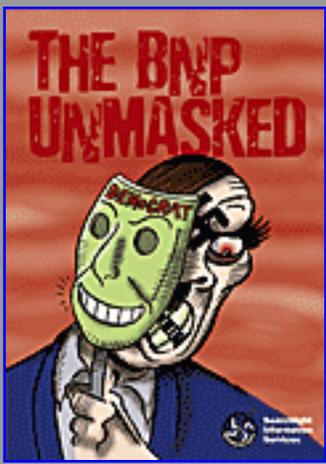
“I think Nelson Mandela is brilliant, I told Bev so, and she didn’t say a word.” “Bev” is of course the (white) South African BNP official who covers Burnley for the BNP. She must have cringed at Maureen Stowe’s response to being asked who her political influences were, but it would seem the BNP was so desperate and eager to deceive that it also failed to tell Stowe, the former BNP councillor, that her adoption of a mixed raced child would also be frowned upon by a large section of the party membership.

Cllr Stowe is a 62-year-old non-political politician who like many of her generation despairs at the rapid decline of her northern industrial town. Galvanised by a growing feeling that the government and her local council were becoming inept when it came to listening to voices like hers, she joined a new political party. And they loved her. “They could not do enough for me,” she says at her home to where she has just returned after another day of apologetically meeting her constituents. “I went to their meetings, which were boring, but I did think that Nick Griffin [the BNP leader] was some kind of saviour. He presented himself in the Mandela mould, as some kind of freedom fighter, but he used us, he used me. Once we got elected he never had time for us, he would never tell me what the policies were. The rest of the councillors knew, they were hard-core, but they would not say either. I had to ring Griffin constantly to ask him if things that were being said about the BNP’s policies were true. He did not seem to have any interest in the town or the people once we were elected.” It took 62 years and knowing Griffin for Maureen to get her first lesson in political expediency.

People experienced in dealing with fascist parties have a tendency to cringe when faced with a councillor like Mrs Stowe. She could be your mum, your neighbour or your old school teacher, there seems no way to discredit her tenacity or dedication to people. She is after all a dedicated and hardworking woman raising her voice and pushing and shoving among the stuffed shirts of the council chamber. So how could she *not* know what she was letting herself in for? How could a woman of her years and experience



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not know she was about to become a councillor for a fascist party? She takes a long draw of breath before answering. It could after all be her distrust of politicians generally. “Can you believe I didn’t know? It’s shocking but they all wore suits and spoke about the things that were concerning people I knew too. I really thought they were the silent voice; it was what they didn’t say that eventually gave it away. They did not and could not care about the people who voted for them in the slightest.”

The privilege of being on the council was the first giveaway for Mrs Stowe. The other councillors had an almost strict policy of silence in the chamber. “The other BNP councillors were overawed about not being allowed to say what they really wanted to say, they sat in silence or as previously did not even turn up to meetings to avoid having to have an input.

“They had some strange ideas, some very strange ideas, but they would never say them, through fear of being exposed, I suppose. I began to realise it was all a big con, then I realised I had contributed to the shaming of Burnley. I love my town, I am a local lass, and I had absolutely no idea that the BNP did not care about Burnley at all. They had other ideas and they lied to people. I did not join the BNP because they did not like Asians or asylum seekers, I joined the BNP and became a councillor because I love this town.”

After a moment of contemplative silence and a long sigh, Cllr Stowe picks up again where she left off. The local BNP branch has just put out a leaflet criticising her and telling her to stand down now she has left the party. The BNP also came to see her and she’s admitted she felt intimidated when three members were on her doorstep, trying to persuade her not to embarrass the party by resigning.

“They are a disgrace,” she says, “and I will not back down from them. This town is built on Asian input into the industry we used to have here. It was not the Asians who took the industry away, was it?” Without waiting for an answer, Cllr Stowe throws up other gems. “I went to the Red, White and Blue festival last year and heard what Luke [Smith, the councillor who resigned following an attack on another member] had done and how they had thrown him out. He’s a lovely but a daft lad who they used as well, really.” Cllr Stowe is not going to resign, she’s actually going to do what she thought she had been elected for: community politics with an always open ear available for the people of the town.

“They’ve shamed our town, people think that Burnley is the race hate capital of Britain now. We only have 34 registered asylum seekers, but the BNP won’t tell my people what they really believe. They made me shame my

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town, the BNP brought shame on my town.”

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