

Teaching for **SOLIDARITY**

Reading Six: The British National Party (BNP)

'There is a need for things to stay the same...Nothing's like it was...Transport, hospitals...everything is falling apart because of the sheer weight of numbers [of immigrants]. I blame the hosepipe ban on them... We're just ordinary people concerned for our country....We need to get back to the old standards.'

Resident of Hartley and Wintney, Hampshire on *Turning Right* Radio 4 (8th May 2007) explaining why she had decided to vote BNP for the first time.

Who are 'we'? and who are 'they'? 'Who belongs in 'our land'? What sort of country does the British National Party (BNP) want and why? What is their appeal to thousands of people? The answers are complicated and link questions of identity, belonging, history and Britishness with those of real conflicts about resources and class.

The British National Party is a small far right-wing political party, formed in 1982 as a result of leadership disputes within the National Front which was an openly Nazi party. The BNP has policies on everything from fishing to street crime and nuclear weapons. They believe schools should have morning assemblies with Christian worship (minorities should "either accept our ways or go somewhere else"). But the overwhelming emphasis of their literature is on immigration and creating an all-white Britain. They talk about 'racial bloodlines' and 'the British race':

"The British people have walked the hills and valleys of this country for at least ten thousand years, their blood, sweat and toil has transformed this island into our home! Remember that this land is your land. The British people of today are taught to feel ashamed of their people's achievements...If the present trend of mass immigration into Britain continues, our people will become a minority in their own country and our very way of life will be facing extinction in just a few generations." (www.bnp.org.uk, 2007)

In 1982, John Tyndall, founder of the British National Party, declared, 'Hitler's *Mein Kampf* is my bible....The Holocaust is a myth, but it won't be next time.'

Nick Griffin, their leader since 1999 realized that their Nazi image (in his words, 'a gang of skinhead bigmouths') was unacceptable in the UK and most voters would not identify with it. So the BNP have exchanged their jack boots for smart suits in order to appear, 'A party for which respectable law abiding middle class people can vote with no shame.'

Between 2000 and 2007, 50 BNP Councillors - some with criminal convictions including domestic abuse, racial hatred and assaulting a police officer – were elected. In the May 2006 local elections they won 13% of the vote (approx. 250,000 voters) and BNP councillors took their place on, for example Halifax, Burnley, Sandwell, Dudley, Calderdale, Stoke and Broxbourne councils and they won 13 seats in Barking and Dagenham. All either in or near areas where there was social tension, high levels of

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immigration, poverty, crime, unemployment and housing shortages. All except three had been voted out by 2012:

"Where white communities were living at some distance and quite remote, with no Asians in the immediate neighbourhood, that is where the greatest swing to the BNP occurred...This suggests that it is fears and stereotypes and prejudices which have been stirred up terribly." (Michael Meacher, Labour MP, Oldham West and Royton).

At a BNP meeting in Batley, West Yorkshire, people expressed their fears, "We're frightened to be British," says Ann Nailor, who runs five Age Concern shops. "I feel alienated in my own community," said Neil Feeney, a water company employee. "People who read your paper have no idea about places like this," (Marjorie Shaw, a former policewoman now in a wheelchair). "The BNP are the only ones standing up for this country," added Lynn Winfield, a pub dishwasher. Nick Griffin fans the flames. He calls the English "one of the most oppressed peoples on earth". (*The Times* April 19th 2007)

'We do virtually nothing to assuage fears, get people to meet and develop relationships. The 'host' community is worried about change. As a result, the BNP has a field day spreading myths and rumours.' Ted Cattle (Chair of Community Cohesion Institute). The BNP is not the only far right group organising politically.

Writing about the election of the first BNP councillor in 1993, Vron Ware observes, 'it appeared...few people who voted for the BNP cared about their underlying policies or ideologiesThe slogan 'Rights for Whites' had resonated among those who felt that their needs had been passed over in favour of the Bangladeshi population. Their votes had been cast as a form of protest reflecting their frustration and feelings of abandonment by their former representatives in the mainstream parties...' (*Who Cares About Britishness*, 2007 p. 23)

Black community and anti-racist groups, trade unions, religious groups, political parties and individuals have organised to protest against the BNP. And the party have to send their materials to eastern Europe for printing because no print plant in the UK will handle it. Love Music Hate Racism (LMHR) was set up in 2002 in response to rising levels of racism and electoral successes for the British National Party. Billy Bragg is one of LMHR's main campaigners:

"Back in the late 70s, I was working in an office, a place of casual racism and homophobia. I never spoke out against it because I felt I was in a minority and didn't want the grief. On the streets, the National Front were marching through immigrant neighbourhoods, stirring up trouble and trying to divide communities. I may well have carried on turning a blind eye were it not for The Clash. When their name was added to the bill of the first Rock Against Racism carnival in April 1978, I knew I had to be there.

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When I arrived at the rally, in east London, I was amazed to see 100,000 young people just like me - one for every vote the National Front had won in the council elections the year before. I came away with a strong sense that this was where my generation was going to make its stand. Just as youth in the 50s had marched against the bomb and the longhairs of the 60s had opposed the Vietnam War, we were going to define ourselves in opposition to discrimination in all its forms. It was the music of The Clash that got me to the Rock Against Racism carnival. However, it wasn't the songs they played that day, or the speeches that were made from the stage that changed my world. It was being in that audience. I went to work the next day determined to speak up against racists, confident in the knowledge that I was not alone."

(www.lovemusicateracism.com)

In October 2007 Billy Bragg returned to his old school in Barking to talk about music and politics. Scores of students signed up to get involved with LMHR.

'Our music - Rock, Reggae, Hip Hop, Bhangra, Indie, R and B, Punk, Grime, Jazz and Soul - is living testimony to the fact that cultures can and do mix. It unites us and gives us strength, and offers a vibrant celebration of our multicultural and multiracial society. Racism seeks only to divide and weaken us'. (Weyman Bennett, Joint Secretary of Unite Against Fascism)

And one person who dedicated the last twenty year of his life to challenging the BNP, Holocaust survivor Leon Greenman, would have agreed.

Born in Whitechapel, London in 1910, Leon and his Dutch wife Else went to live in Holland in 1935 where their son Barney was born 5 years later and just two months before Holland was occupied by Nazis. Leon and his small family were trapped there and like millions of Jews, they were rounded up and forced to the death camp, Auschwitz-Birkenau. Else and Barney were gassed on arrival. Leon survived six concentration camps. For over 60 years, until he died in 2008, Leon was active against neo-Nazi organisations like the BNP.

'In 1943 I promised god that if I made it out of the camps then I would tell the world of the evil of the Nazis and what millions had gone through, so that other people wouldn't vote for those people, so no further generation could repeat the mistake... The Nazi mind wants to dominate you. They don't want people to work together. Education is my way. I don't go hitting people. I tell them what happened to me and it's up to them to listen, to take notice. The BNP tell the people a lot of lies...They make promises and the people believe them. Who am I now? I can't describe myself. I'm proper damaged, whichever way you look at it. My wife and son and millions of others were destroyed by people, people who had wives, children, a dog, a cat or a rabbit. All I can say is that I want the outside world to understand what happened in the camps. You've got to feel it as if it happened to you. Young and old alike must learn about the

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Holocaust as a warning about the dangers of racism. We must not forget. Please do not forget.' (in an interview with Carrie Supple, July 22nd 2007).

When Leon signed his name, he also wrote the number tattooed on his arm by the Nazis, 98288. For that was his identity in the camps. No name, no nationality, place dedicated to systematically murdering people because of their race.

Discussion:

Many people attribute the rise of groups like the BNP to fear and a sense of insecurity. What do you think about this connection? A study of the Weimar Republic reveals a similar pattern, that many Germans sought stability, security and harkened back to what they knew, a past that felt comfortable.

In a democratic society, groups of all kinds will emerge, including some that profess hate and call for supremacy of one group over another. Democratic governments have a responsibility to protect people with different religious, economic, cultural, social and political views even when a group's views might be offensive. Governments also have a responsibility to protect their citizens from violence and abuse. If you were advising your local representative about whether to allow a BNP candidate to campaign, what would you say and why?

An organisation called Facing History and Ourselves creates resources that allow teachers and students to have thoughtful discussions about some of the most challenging issues that we face as citizens. Some people might argue that there should not be any material in an education resource about the BNP, because it might appear to excuse or legitimate their actions. What are your thoughts?

Billy Bragg and Leon Greenman dedicated their lives to fighting hatred and intolerance. What are some of the defining moments in their lives that inspired them to make this choice?

The recent increase in immigration (over 1 million foreign nationals joined workforce 1997 - 2007) and a reduction in secure employment have created insecurity and fear in parts of the UK. Where there is no real connection between new and old residents, such fear and insecurity can lead to resentment and a desire for a return to familiarity. A youth worker from Greenwich, London described what she sees happening in her community in 1997. Has it changed?:

"If you've got nothing and I say to you, 'Well, I know you've got nothing however these people have got nothing and I'm going to prioritise these people who've got nothing because they are...whatever...Any ethnic minority.' That doesn't make any sense to you. That doesn't make you feel better. Because you've got nothing anyway. So how can you make sense of giving what you haven't got to somebody else? And then what

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happens is...What leaps into your mind is the fact that you're actually a native of this country and that's being undermined. Your identity is not a priority. What is being British about? What does it mean? Now we get into education about what is British culture. And what becomes even more nonsensical is because no-one of us truly believes there is one black culture, one Asian culture, any one culture. And none of us truly believes that there is one British culture. They are all so diverse. Whether you come from Scotland, Ireland, Wales, they're all so different. That didn't used to be such a mega problem. But suddenly now that people are being put under one cultural umbrella, white young people are often left out from that. And therefore they design their own and it's not always a very pleasant culture they design. Isn't it sad that when we look at the British flag, the Union Jack, we see it as a BNP emblem? We don't see it as representative of our country. Why? How did that happen? Look at the world cup. Everybody displays the St George's Cross because everyone has now accepted that what our flag has become is an abomination. And that is incredibly sad. Why did we allow that to happen? The flag is a representation of who we are. How could we have allowed that to have been destroyed and to have become such an awful identity?"
(*Routes of Racism*, video, Roger Hewitt/Franco Rosso 1997)