



The lessons of the general election for the campaign against the BNP

Introduction

The general election confirmed the trend of rising BNP support, which has accelerated dramatically over the last five years.

The biggest general election vote for the far right in British history

The BNP stood 119 candidates in the 2005 general election. They won a total of 192,750 votes — the highest far right general election vote in British history — four times their vote at the previous general election in 2001.

Some people have argued there is little cause for concern because, it is suggested, the rise in the BNP vote simply reflects the fact that they stood more candidates this year, 119, compared to 33 in 2001. However, the very ability of the BNP to stand far more candidates reflects their greater strength and, not only did the BNP share of the national vote nearly quadruple, but the average share of the vote in those constituencies where the BNP stood also increased.

The longer term trend of BNP support

If the trend of the BNP vote is considered over a longer period, the pattern becomes obvious. Over the last thirteen years, the BNP's general election vote has risen dramatically, from 7,005 votes in 1992, to 35,832 in 1997, 47,129 in 2001 and 192,750 in 2005.

Demonstrating increasing strength in a growing number of local geographical areas the BNP saved their deposits in 34 constituencies, compared to just 5 in 2001, 3 in 1997 and none in 1992.

The BNP won nearly a third of their total vote in Yorkshire

Much attention has been given to the highest BNP vote in a single constituency, 16.9 per cent, in Barking east London, but the regional breakdown of the vote shows an even more serious trend with a very large BNP vote in Yorkshire. The biggest increase in the BNP vote was in the Yorkshire and Humberside region, where their vote increased from 3,245 votes in 2001 to 60,990 votes in 2005, representing 2.8% of the regional total. That is nearly four times their average share of the vote nationally. Indeed, Yorkshire alone accounted for nearly a third of the entire vote for the BNP in the UK and 14 of the 34 constituencies where they saved their deposits were in this region.

The overall trend of BNP support

General election results tend to understate the overall trend of electoral advance of the BNP because the first past the post electoral system for Westminster makes it almost impossible for the BNP to win a seat. Therefore the general election results must be seen in the context of the overall electoral advances of the BNP.

In the Mayoral election in Stoke on 5 May this year, the BNP received 15,776 votes — 19 per cent of the vote.

In the elections for the European Parliament in June 2004, the BNP won 800,000 votes — the biggest vote for the far right in British history — narrowly missing winning four seats. Again, the biggest BNP vote was in Yorkshire and Humberside — where they won eight per cent of the vote.

In the London Assembly elections, they won 90,000 votes — missing the five per cent threshold for a seat in the London Assembly by just 0.1 per cent.

At the same time, the BNP has been gaining ground at local level, currently holding 21 council seats across the country. In June last year, again their biggest advance was in Bradford

where the BNP won four seats on the local council, two of them in Keighley.

The biggest reverses for the BNP were in Oldham

While the BNP vote increased throughout most of the country, in one area – Oldham — they suffered a shuddering defeat in the general election. In Oldham West and Royton the BNP vote fell from 16.4 per cent in 2001 — the highest in the country — to 6.9 per cent this year. In Oldham East and Saddleworth their vote fell from 11.2 per cent in 2001 to 4.9 per cent this year. These were by far the biggest reverses for the BNP in the entire country.

If what happened in Oldham had happened across the UK the rise of the BNP would have been definitively reversed. So it is vital that the lessons of the rolling back of the BNP in Oldham and its rise in parts of Yorkshire, particularly the Bradford and Keighley area are understood and applied.

The stakes in the anti-fascist struggle in Britain today

The general election results confirmed that if presents trends are sustained, it is simply a matter of time before the BNP make that national breakthrough. That has not been reversed anywhere it has happened elsewhere in Europe in recent years.

Therefore, for those who have no desire to see a fascist party ensconced in the mainstream of British politics the time to act is now. The lesson from the rest of Europe is that it will be far easier to stop a national breakthrough from occurring in the first place, than to reverse it once it has occurred.

What strategy to defeat the BNP?

The advance of the BNP can be stopped — as the experience of some parts of the country has already shown — but it will require a massive and united effort, and most importantly an effective strategy.

The BNP is a fascist party. Fascism stands for the complete destruction of all legal organisations of the working class, suppression of democratic institutions, war, racism, anti-Semitism and the persecution and attempted extermination entire peoples.

The anti-fascist movement must alert and unite the great majority of society who are threatened by the rise of such parties. The aim must be to defeat them before they come anywhere near influencing the national political agenda let alone achieving political power. This cannot be done without taking on, and defeating, their political arguments.

The political cutting edge of the extreme right, including the BNP today, is racism — particularly directed against Black and Asian communities, Muslim communities and refugees.

How the BNP uses racism to build local bases

Wherever the BNP has gained ground in a particular area it has been on the back of a rise in racism. This is especially the case where other parties, the media or institutions like the Police or local councils have given legitimacy to racism by making concessions to it.

When the BNP won a council by-election in the Millwall ward of the east London borough of Tower Hamlets in September 1993, the context was systematic racism, exclusion and discrimination against the local Bangladeshi community. The local Liberal Democrat council, for example, pursued a 'sons and daughters' housing policy, which discriminated against Bangladeshis in the allocation of council housing. In this context, the BNP presented itself as simply the most consistent advocate of a racist policy legitimised by others. After it won a council seat racist attacks increased 300 per cent in the area.

In Oldham, the context was statements by the local Police and the local newspaper wrongly claiming that most racist attacks in the area were by Asians upon whites. The intervention of the BNP inflamed the situation further with physical attacks on Asian areas provoking a response with Asian youths clashing with the police when they defended their neighbourhoods.

In Bradford, where the recent advance of the BNP has been dramatic — winning four council seats in Bradford and Keighley — the context was bitter controversy around allegations that Asian men were grooming under-age white teenagers for sex, that criminality and drug trafficking were rife in the local Asian community and that the blame for lower educational achievements by Muslims lay with poor knowledge of English in part due to marriages to partners from the Indian subcontinent. The BNP was able to seize on these allegations to demonise the local Asian community.

The anti-fascist struggles in these areas provide important lessons. The first is that it is impossible to defeat the BNP by making concessions to the racism on which they feed – it is necessary to confront racism head on. The second is that, in addition to the left and the trade unions, the alliance to defeat the BNP must also include at its core the Black and Asian communities who are the targets on the BNP's racist attacks.

Lessons of the campaigns against the BNP

● Millwall

In Millwall, the TUC responded to the election of BNP councillor Derek Beackon by launching the Unite Against Racism campaign in a close alliance with the local Bangladeshi community. Racism was tackled head-on with national exposure, which led a number of national figures to take their distance from the policies of the local Liberal Democrat council. Although Millwall was a predominantly white ward, the campaign's strategy was to mobilise every single anti-fascist voter and the Bangladeshi community played a vital role in that. The TUC called a national Unite Against Racism demonstration took place in the area before the elections in May 1994.

In the subsequent council elections, the BNP candidate, Derek Beackon's vote increased by a third to 2041. But he was still defeated because the turn out increased by 22.4 per cent to 66.4% — far higher than anywhere else in London. Labour won the seat with 3547 votes (50 per cent of the total vote) and won control of Tower Hamlets council from the Liberal Democrats.

● Oldham

A similar strategy was adopted by the TUC in Oldham, after the last general election in 2001, when BNP leader Nick Griffin won the highest ever BNP vote, 16.4 per cent, in a parliamentary election, beating the Liberal Democrats into third place in the Oldham West and Royton constituency. The BNP made Oldham their number one target area. As in Tower Hamlets, John Monks, then general secretary of the TUC went to Oldham and helped forge an alliance between the national trade union movement and the local Pakistani and Bangladeshi communities — the Oldham Coalition Against Racism.

This broad alliance fought a ferocious political battle against the racism, which had allowed the BNP to take off in Oldham. It exploded racist myths — for example, proving that Asians were four times more likely to be victims of racial incidents than white people. The campaign was so effective that the local paper and the local council leaders became supporters.

The result was that BNP's hoped for Oldham breakthrough never occurred. They have still not won a council seat and, though still high, their vote fell nearly 10 per cent in the wards they contested between 2002 and 2004. In the general election the BNP's vote fell far more in Oldham than in any other part of the country — confirming the effectiveness of the anti-fascist strategy in that area.

● Bradford

In Bradford, a different approach was taken. The mythology that has been created of the so-called 'grooming' of white school children by Asian men who supposedly can't have proper relationships because of plans for arranged marriages with relatively uneducated partners from Pakistan and Bangladesh has been a gift to the BNP. The fact that this phenomenon appears to be unique to the Bradford area should give pause for thought. The local police denied that this was a phenomenon in which the perpetrators were Asian and the victims white.

In a city where the Asian communities make up nearly a quarter of the population, they should be at the centre of an alliance against the BNP, however this kind of approach giving credence to racist stereotypes is more likely to alienate the local community and provide ammunition for the fascists.

A debate on these issues of strategy for the anti-fascist movement is long overdue. The stakes could not be higher.

Conclusion

The general election confirmed the continuing rise of the BNP — and the fact that they have yet to make the kind of breakthrough into mass politics achieved by the far right in much of the rest of the Europe. However, if present trends continue, they will make that breakthrough and it will then be far more difficult to reverse than to stop it before it occurs.

The anti-fascist movement should be guided in its strategy by what approach actually works in stopping the BNP. The clear lesson of recent years is that the racism of the BNP has to be tackled head on — any concessions to racism legitimize the BNP.

The broadest possible coalition against the BNP has to be constructed nationally and locally, centrally involving the trade unions, the black, Asian and minority ethnic communities, religious faiths, lesbian and gay groups and every other community threatened by the fascists. Building links between the trade unions and Black, Asian, Muslim, Jewish and other communities will be a critical part of this process.

In the run-up to next year's local elections the national movement must clarify its strategy and, with the agreement of the activists on the ground, assist the struggle in each area in the front line of the fight against the BNP.

