
Free Speech for Fascists?

“**NO PLATFORM!**” This is the slogan employed by much of the British left to encompass their policy of refusing to debate with members of the British National Party. Not satisfied with refusing to argue face-to-face with fascists most of the left call on the BBC and other media organisations to follow suit. They seek to ban fascists from trade union membership, students’ unions, university campuses, and from all other public arenas. They also call upon the state to ban fascist gatherings, festivals, and demonstrations.

This response stems from a miasma of historical fear and panic, which leads modern anti-fascist youth to raise the slogan – “They Shall Not Pass” – implicitly linking their struggle against Nick Griffin, and his puny party, to the heroism of the Spanish working class in defending Madrid against the forces of General Francisco Franco. This absurd comparison is echoed by barmy accounts in which the British National Party is compared to the massed ranks of the Nazi Party, the Third Reich, and on occasions, even to the Wehrmacht of the early forties.

The truth is, of course, that the British National Party has less than ten thousand active members, nobody in the Westminster Parliament, two people in the European Parliament, and four-dozen councillors out of a possible 21,000 local council seats in the UK. However, the BNP does have a bark louder than its bite and in garnering 943,000 votes during the recent Euro elections, the Party demonstrated that its hatred of what it likes to call the ‘liberal elite’, and its opposition to mass immigration, has wide appeal among a significant section of the English working class.

This has placed the left in something of a quandary. Trotsky’s suggestion that we should deal with fascists “by acquainting their heads with the pavement”, has

become muddled up with a lot of chanting and egg throwing, but very little organised violence. Most people on the left seem instinctively to understand that murdering fascists would be counter-productive as well as illegal. So they have resorted to a lot of bluster, pushing and shoving, and irate calls upon the authorities to prevent British National Party leaders from addressing meetings or influencing public debate.

This has been met with a muted response by mainstream political parties, whose broad agreement with the left is expressed by their adoption of a policy of ostracising the fascists, refusing to debate with them, and promoting the idea (worthy of Walter Mitty himself), that BNP voters are somehow unaware of the Party's racism. According to this rather quaint notion, the million people who voted BNP were simply protesting against the major parties and didn't know that the party was a racist party, committed to Keeping Britain White and chucking out immigrants.

There is a kind of competitive bad faith in which everybody from those on the far left, to the Conservative right, seek to minimise, or even deny altogether, that racism has any influence at all upon those voting BNP or on those active trade unionists supporting Gordon Brown's slogan "British Jobs for British Workers". Consequently, the BNP has been cast as a dishonest party, led by a slick leader, given to charming people, against their better selves and their better judgement, into voting fascist. We are invited to believe that most of the 943,000 BNP voters simply didn't understand what they were doing.

The truth, of course, is much more complicated than that. Popular racism in Britain is tangled up with mass immigration in which significant areas of British towns and cities have become home to large communities of people who speak their own languages, adopt forms of dress associated with the countries from which they come, eat different food, and actively support religions which historically have had little or no presence in British society. These alien influences are in turn associated with the loss of jobs, low pay, poor

schools, inadequate health services and, above all, a shortage of secure, good quality, low rent housing.

If racism is defined as attributing one's social and economic problems to the presence of those of different races and ethnicities, then racism is widespread in Britain. It is in this pool of resentment that the BNP has been fishing. They know that racism is widespread and they know how easy it is from their fascist point of view to win people over to an outlook encapsulated by slogans like "Britain for the British" and "British Jobs for British Workers".

The fascists are tapping into much that is true; much that is contradictory, and much that is myth. It is true that the minimum wage has been held down by the availability of high quality immigrant labour more than willing to work for low pay. Many foreign workers from poorer countries have arrived and are keen to work, even for £5.73p an hour (or less, if they're under 22). This has placed local British people, unwilling to work for such wages, in a bad light and has, in recent years, contributed to wage stagnation throughout the economy.

The preparedness of councils to put up notices and print leaflets in foreign languages, to fund community services, and even housing associations, targeted at immigrant groups and communities has contributed to the impression that foreigners who have come to settle here are given the *Red Carpet* treatment, while those who have always lived here are left to languish unaided. Mosques, temples, and gurdwaras spring up, corner shops and other businesses are bought up by relative newcomers, while entire neighbourhoods are taken over by 'foreigners' and "nothing is done" for what the BNP likes to call, "the indigenous population".

There is *some* truth in all this. The largely white host population is deemed to have few distinctive needs associated with their language or ethnicity. Consequently, councils and other bodies do not feel the need to target special services at white British people. After all, ninety per cent of the population in Britain are white people whose mother tongue is English; most of

them do not belong to a clearly defined minority. Hence, they do not, by and large, attract services designed for the special needs of minorities.

So, the perception that special treatment is reserved for immigrants and foreigners is broadly correct, but the idea that this has elbowed out the white English is wrong. The range of problems, which blight the lives of poorer people throughout Britain irrespective of race or ethnicity such as low pay, lousy schools, crime and delinquency, inadequate childcare services, and the shortage of decent houses for rent, can only be tackled by major economic and social changes – getting rid of immigrants and foreigners would do nothing to help, and would almost certainly make matters much worse.

This argument has to be had out in the open. The BNP's economic policies and ideas should be challenged and discussed in detail. The likely consequences of the BNP's plans concerning law and order, mixed marriages, driving gays back into the closet, and the removal of all non-white people from the country, should be discussed. The tin-pot fascists should be trashed in open debate, and exposed for the nincompoops they really are.

The BNP have benefitted from the widespread refusal to discuss both, racism in general, and their programme in particular. They have benefitted from the perception that politicians, from the far left to the mainstream right, are frightened to confront racist responses or fascist solutions to what are in reality serious and chronic shortages in the provision of housing, good quality apprenticeships, and hope for poorer people of all ethnicities in Britain.

Now that almost a million people have cast their vote for the BNP it is time to challenge racist explanations for people's problems; it is time to defeat fascism in open political debate. We need to make clear that the BNP is a no-hope party with hopeless policies inspired by bitterness and rancour, which will not house a single family or get a single person the job or training that they need.