

Book Review: New British Fascism: Rise of the British National Party

Matthew Goodwin's recent book will be essential reading for those interested in studying recent British political history, finds Matthew Partridge.

New British Fascism: Rise of the British National Part. Matthew J, Goodwin. [Routledge](#). April 2011.

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With Norway still in mourning for the 77 people killed on July 22nd by the far-right terrorist Anders Breivik, Matthew Goodwin's study of the rise of the British National Party has already attracted substantial media coverage. Even more recently, the aftermath of the [London riots](#) has seen fringe groups in the news again, accused of trying to [inflame racial tensions](#). Goodwin, a lecturer in the School of Politics and International Relations at the [University of Nottingham](#), is well placed to deliver a verdict on the topic, having conducted research into extremism for several years.

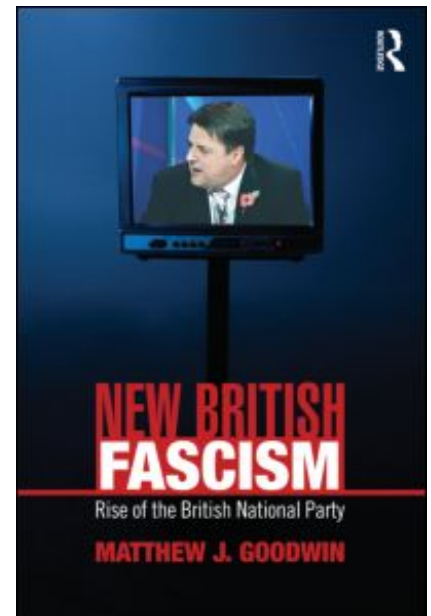
His recent book, *New British Fascism: Rise of the British National Party* is broken down in to eight chapters, the first three dealing with the historical narrative, starting with a general look at the history of fascist and Neo-Nazi movements in Britain. The book moves into an examination of how the BNP gradually embraced a strategy focused on electoral politics from the 1990s onward, which brought it some success in the first decade of the twenty-first century. The final three chapters take a more micro-level approach, using interviews and testimony to find out what motivates people to become members of the BNP, and what keeps them active.

Although many of these interviews contain the usual self-serving justifications, they provide some important insights. One theme that comes across pretty strongly is the importance of image and presentation in persuading people to get involved. For instance, one activist is quoted as saying "I was worried that I'd turn up and there'd be a big gathering of skinheads or something. But it was just normal people in a hall" [p.136]. Conversely, another participant is quoted as saying that "images of John Tyndall [the previous leader] dressed in ridiculous uniforms...have tarnished the party in some way and make it difficult to get away from things we were once labelled as" [p.136].

However, the book's focus on the growth of the most notorious political group in British politics seems to have been overtaken by recent events – any gains in popularity the party have made in the last few years may well be minimized. The evidence seems to suggest that, far from conferring legitimacy to Nick Griffin and his party, the publicity generated by success at the [2009 European Elections](#) seems to have led to a substantial backlash. Last year's elections resulted in frustration at national level and decimation in local government, leading the author to admit that "the fact that the party is not extending its appeal...suggests a bleak future" [p. 180].

At the same time the BNP's position as the dominant far-right grouping is being continually challenged by the English Defence League. In contrast to the BNP, the EDL adamantly insist that they are not fascists, that their main concern is "Islamification" not immigration or "racial purity", and contend that they have members from a wider range of backgrounds, including ethnic minorities. Even the notorious "2083" manifesto issued by Breivik in an attempt to justify his killing rampage attempted to claim inspiration from medieval history, rather than fascism. Of course, there is evidence of a substantial overlap between EDL and BNP membership. Similarly, despite his attempt to use theories about a clash of civilizations to bolster his murderous ideology, it is clear that Breivik was a pretty conventional fascist, claiming that Britain, France and America have "a considerable Jewish problem" and agreeing with Hitler's initial idea of deporting Jews en masse from Germany.

Nonetheless, this change in rhetoric and style indicates that the far right *is* continuing to evolve, tailoring its campaigning to the issue of the day, while keeping its core goals and ideology the same. There is also the possibility that there might be renewed focus on direct action, rather than electoral politics.



While it is clear that *New British Fascism* will be required reading for those interested in studying recent British political history, its usefulness as a guide to the future direction of the extreme right is at the moment less clear.

Dr Matthew Partridge has recently completed a *PhD in Economic History* at the London School of Economics.