

Book Review: British National Party: Contemporary Perspectives

*The period which the BNP felt was their own is slipping away from them, finds [Carl Packman](#) in his review of *British National Party: Contemporary Perspectives*.*

British National Party: Contemporary Perspectives. Nigel Copsey and Graham Macklin. [Routledge](#). February 2011.

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The first thing to say about this book is that there is never a wrong time to publish critical, in depth material about one of the most – if not *the* most – electorally successful far right parties in the UK. On the day of writing this review, the *Daily Mirror* ran with a splash about the presence of a man – Chris Hopgood – who describes himself as the leader of the British arm of the Ku Klux Klan. [The article](#) goes on to quote Hopgood giving complimentary praise to Nick Griffin, the leader of the BNP, and its success on being “elected by the people of England” [sic]. It is episodes like this where one can console themselves that for every time the party tries to present itself as mainstream something reminds us of the truth (for which we should be grateful).

But though, strictly speaking, there is never an inappropriate time to publish such a book, the authors have picked an interesting time for the BNP. One of the editors, Professor Nigel Copsey of [Teeside University](#), is cited as the author who, six years ago, published the first very in-depth book length study of the British National Party to date – for which there were many imitations. Back then the party were experiencing a growth spurt. Though still relatively minor in the scheme of things, they had made sizeable breakthroughs, owing in particular to the image change, known colloquially as the transformation “from boots to suits”.

This new found respectability seemed to work. The election of two MEPs, a Conservative party which normally monopolises the populist sentiment on immigration keen to toe the centre ground, and economic instability raising the spectre of tension, spelt good things for the BNP. But much has changed in more recent times – party finances went to pot, tensions between old-school and “modern” party members re-emerged, and the rise of the EDL threatened to undercut the BNP’s natural base.

This volume captures the rise and the fall of the party. Indeed as the opening chapter points out, drawing on later chapters comparing the BNP with their European counterparts, part of the reason the party could never take on the respectable, mainstream image, for which it strived so much, is because it has failed to shift what Copsey has called the “reputational shield” which, with help from mainstream politicians and anti-fascist activists, serves as a constant reminder that the BNP are, as they always have been, a fringe interest party with unpalatable views.

Efforts to make the party more mainstream didn’t begin with Nick Griffin. Part of the influence for this was with 1960s BNP leader John Bean, even more so than with the French Front National founder Jean-Marie Le Pen (generally thought to be Griffin’s influence as well as closest European ally). John Tyndall, the man to take Bean’s place in the later years was an unreconstructed neo-Nazi who embedded the fascist image in to the BNP, leaving behind an important dividing line, made particularly more relevant by the decline in support for the National Front.

The chapter written by Karin Bottom and Colin Copus discussing BNP councillors poses particular challenges to the way opponents of the far right report on elected members. No longer, the authors suppose, can we simply regurgitate the “BNP bad councillors” line anymore, particularly when councillors from all parties have problems with etiquette and attendance.

One of the more troubling chapters by Copsey and the second editor, Graham Macklin also of Teeside



University, discusses the perception of the BNP in the national press. While the authors are right to raise the problem of tabloids' attitudes towards migration, rather than blame those organs for giving the BNP's views a platform (which, more correctly, is just a shared populism on the subject), we should really be criticising the Mail and the Express for churning out virulent copy because they know it will sell.

Roger Griffin (no relation), in his chapter, notes that Nick Griffin's project of modernisation will fail if, in an amusing tone, he relies too much on foreign imports (like from Len Pen). But though he has offered his split and progressively more unpopular party an olive branch by saying he will stand down in 2013, the period which the BNP felt was their own is slipping away from them. Though this book has done well to contextualise the party, including important reminders of its unceasing racist policies and members, many of the conclusions were lazy and sometimes unhelpful.

Carl Packman is a health researcher, writer and blogger. Read more about Carl on our [reviewers page](#).