

Moving from a race-based agenda to a focus on civic virtue has aided the BNP's resurgence in the last decade

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The British National Party gained no seats in the 2010 general election, and were trounced in Barking. Yet in the longer view the party still increased its vote share and the past decade has been a successful one, with BNP members now sitting in the European Parliament and the London Assembly. [Daphne Halikiopoulou](#) and [Sofia Vasilopoulou](#) attribute these successes to the BNP's change of tactics after 2000, adopting a discourse focusing on civic virtue rather than on race – and one quite similar to the approach of the more 'respectable' UK Independence Party.



As the leader of the British National Party (BNP) [fights his way through court](#) over the party's policy of barring non-white members, it is important to remember that despite some setbacks in 2010 the extreme right in the UK has undergone a relative resurgence in the past decade. The relative rise of the extreme right in Britain has been particularly evident in local and European Parliament elections, where the electoral system is more permissive of small party representation.



Though the rise of the extreme right is a cross-European phenomenon, it is particularly interesting in Britain for a number of reasons including its constitutional arrangements, its restrictive electoral system and its liberal and inclusive political culture. How can we explain this resurgence in support? Since 2000 the BNP have used elements of British national identity in its rhetoric and has attempted to boost its legitimacy by downplaying the issue of race.

Electoral successes

In the 2009 European Parliament elections, the BNP increased its support- receiving for the first time since its establishment an impressive 6.2 per cent of the votes cast nationwide -and gained its first two seats in the European Parliament. It has also experienced a rise in its local support, increasing its representation in the 2008 local elections in a number of councils around the country and securing a seat in the high-profile London Assembly.

In national elections BNP support has also grown, although to a much lesser extent. In the 2005 general election, the BNP more than tripled its vote share to 0.7 per cent compared to the previous 2001 election. In 2010 the BNP failed to achieve the success it had hoped for, not winning a single seat, including Barking where the party and its leader had been extremely active. However, by standing more candidates they did increase their vote share, almost reaching 2 per cent (1.94 per cent) support across Great Britain.

During Nick Griffin's leadership, the BNP has made a discursive choice to shift the emphasis from ethnic to civic elements of British national identity. In the noughties the BNP began to filter the symbolic resources of the British nation from a predominantly civic prism. This process also imitates the discourse of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), a party of the non-extreme right and increasingly successful party on the fringes of the British political system, which also now places immigration at the core of its agenda.

The BNP's discourse before and since 1999

In their 1997 electoral manifesto, the BNP outlined the cornerstones of British nationalism as political sovereignty, ethnic identity, economic nationalism and national unity. Looking at the BNP's manifestos in the 20 years prior to 1999, the BNP's nationalist narrative is clearly based on three pillars: racial, economic and imperial.

- Their racial nationalism is the premise for the other two: 'Our nationalism is ethnic as well as political—in fact it is ethnic before being political.' Immigration is presented as a holistic programme which should be altogether reversed; there is no distinction between skilled or unskilled, legal or illegal. The United Kingdom cannot and should not exist as a multi-ethnic or multicultural entity, and this is non-negotiable: 'Immigration of racially unassimilable peoples into this country must be completely ended and a massive programme of repatriation or resettlement of coloured immigrants and their offsprings

must begin.’

- Their economic nationalism was based on a set of protectionist policies aiming to preserve the British economy from foreign competition and intervention, and with racial nationalism at its core.
- The third pillar of the pre-1999 discourse was imperial nationalism, defined by opposition to separatist movements and all types of decentralisation—for example, devolution and the partial autonomy of Scotland and Wales, and the increasing autonomy of Northern Ireland. Throughout this period their policies promoted assimilation of a British ethnic identity ‘based as it is on a mingling of English, Scottish, Welsh and Irish strains.’

After 1999, the BNP’s manifestos show a shift in this rhetoric. Although race still figures, it does so less prominently and it no longer forms the premise of their nationalist agenda, which gradually and increasingly comprises of civic values such as liberal sovereignty and the rule of law. Their nationalism is portrayed as seeking to preserve the basis of civic values and ‘to create and sustain social political structures in which individual freedom, equality before the Law, private property and popular participation in decision making is to some extent at least genetically predetermined’.

These are all liberal values that the party had previously explicitly rejected as ‘liberal sickness’. References to ethnicity and race appear to be in decline. Civic political bonds, such as citizenship, which feature in the 2005 manifesto as the basis of inclusion, become increasingly mentioned.

A language of birth has also been progressively overshadowed by a language of political rights, such as ‘the right to decide who shall enjoy citizenship and residence within its national borders.’ The premise is now economic nationalism increasingly governed by civic principles. This includes the rejection of immigration, now not solely on the basis of race, but increasingly on the basis of its potential economic and social impact, such as unemployment, welfare dependency and educational failure. Immigration is refuted on the basis of the rule of law and the right for sovereignty. Holistic immigration is replaced by ‘illegal immigration’, which did not feature in their previous manifestos. Race appears, but it is neither prominent nor the premise of the BNP’s post 1999 anti-immigration agenda: ‘[I]n any society claiming to be based on the Rule of Law, it must be beyond serious controversy that all illegal immigrants must be deported as soon as they are discovered.’

A particularly interesting development is the disappearance of sections on the unity of the United Kingdom—what has been termed above as ‘imperial nationalism’. Instead the BNP has completely reversed policy to favour devolution. The party is now committed to preserving the devolved assemblies of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Instead of assimilation, the BNP’s 2005 manifesto proposes unity in diversity, an implicit policy of multiculturalism which would allow different ethnic communities a degree of cultural autonomy—for example, the compulsory teaching of both the English and indigenous languages as well as the teaching of citizenship at school. At the same time it proposes a central administration to deal with ‘civic’ issues such as foreign policy and the economy.

The BNP’s nationalist narrative and that of UKIP

The premise of the UK Independence Party’s nationalist narrative is economic prosperity and self-determination. This underlines UKIP’s impacable opposition to the EU. The core of its nationalism, as put forward in its 2001 manifesto, is therefore predominantly civic: ‘*UKIP supports an inclusive concept of British nationality with common citizenship and shared values.*’ UKIP’s civic nationalist argument, that ‘our nation’ has the right to sovereignty and political independence, holds that in order to be considered British, people need to accept British liberal values.

This pursuit of the right to national self-determination implies a rigid opposition to immigration—a policy fundamental in UKIP’s discourse, justified, however, on the basis of civic ideals. Its nationalist narrative does not include any reference to race and ethnicity, as the party claims to be resolutely opposed to racism. It is this opposition to immigration that forms the core similarity with the BNP’s agenda. A parallel emphasis on the social and economic consequences of increased levels of immigration is increasingly characterising the BNP’s discourse.

Clearly we are not arguing that the BNP has abandoned all references to race or that its discourse is now identical to that of UKIP. But we do find that during the post 1999 period, the BNP has progressively borrowed from UKIP in an effort to frame its discourse in a civic manner. One core area where has happened is in adopting a language of political rights and the rule of law, seeking to justify a nationalism based on the civic conception of freedom.

According to the BNP: ‘[W]e are the only party left that genuinely believes in freedom— freedom for the

individual, freedom for businesses and local communities, freedom from patronising political correctness and from intolerance or injustice.' Increasing references to 'freedom' in the BNP's post 1999 discourse illustrate its attempts to replicate UKIP's nationalist narrative, advocating, among others, freedom from the EU, from crime, from the oppression of the state, from unemployment, freedom of association and freedom of speech.

Freedom to decide the destiny of 'our' nation is gradually replacing earlier BNP justifications of nationalism premised on colour, blood and creed. This rhetorical convergence has resulted in increasingly aligned policies on immigration and European integration with UKIP, with BNP stances now premised on economic and civic, rather than ethnic, arguments.

The BNP in 2010

Paradoxically, 'democracy', 'freedom', 'liberty' and 'justice' feature prominently in the BNP's 2009 European manifesto. At first glance, such inclusive liberal democratic values appear by default contradictory to the ideals and principles of the extreme right. It is precisely this ability of extreme right parties to alter the boundaries of 'the nation' in their discourse that could compromise Britain's 'immunity' from European right-wing extremism.

As [Nigel Copsey](#) argues, the BNP has recently become more inclusive in its rhetoric 'making it even more difficult to pin the "fascist" or "Nazi" label on the well-groomed bespoke suits of Britain's latest generation of neo-fascist extremists'. Changes in a party's discursive toolkit, however, are not the only factor in determining electoral change. The 2010 general election serves as a reminder that the far right's appeal can be blunted if competing centrist parties organize more intensively against them.

*For more information and full references please see: Daphne Halikiopoulou and Sofia Vasilopoulou, [Towards a 'civic' narrative: British national identity and the transformation of the British National Party](#). *The Political Quarterly*, volume 81, (number 4), pp. 583-592.*

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