

Greater London Authority: Election restriction no answer to far-right threat

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A new restriction has been placed on political parties outside the mainstream—Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats—contesting elections to the Greater London Authority (GLA). Candidates standing for the newly created GLA must now gain at least 5 percent of the votes cast. Previously the hurdle was set at 3.5 percent.

Legislation establishing the GLA was passed in the House of Commons in May. Elections for the new citywide council and directly elected Mayor will take place next year. The higher threshold was included as an amendment to the London Authority Bill, as it went through its final reading. In the new Assembly, 11 of its 25 members will be elected through a form of Proportional Representation (giving parties a share of the seats in proportion to the votes they receive); the other 14 will be elected by a simple majority.

Minister for London Nick Raynsford stated that the measure was necessary in order to prevent “extremist groups from poisoning relations”. Raynsford said, “Extremist racist groups have shown in the past in the East End that they are quick to move if they can gain a foothold on the democratic ladder.... The threshold is a bulwark intended to deny a platform to those who, amongst other things, spread fear among our citizens, and seek to undermine our democratic system.”

Raynsford conceded that the new criteria could exclude other small parties, but insisted that it was a price worth paying. Labour MP Ken Livingstone, who is standing for the position of Lord Mayor without his party's support, reiterated this. “We can't ignore the fascists in the hope that they will go away. We must defeat them using all the powers of the state,” he said. Livingstone's sole criticism of the measure was that it did not go far enough, and he repeated his call for the government to be given the power to ban far-right organisations.

The fact that organisations such as the fascist British National Party (BNP) were expected to contest the

elections to the new Assembly was cited as the pretext for the new threshold. The amendment was rushed through amidst the public outrage at the three nail bombings that targeted ethnic minorities and homosexuals. While little-known groups such as Combat 18 and the White Wolves claimed responsibility for the bombings, the BNP denied any involvement in the attacks that killed three people and injured more than 100. The police initially denied that the sole suspect, David Copeland, had any connections with organised far-right groups. However, the *Daily Mirror* subsequently obtained photographs of Copeland participating in a BNP anniversary meeting in 1997 alongside party leader John Tyndall.

The measure received cross-party support, albeit with some minor reservations. The spokesman for the Conservatives, Richard Ottaway, said the recent bombings had “raised the spectre of extremism in London”. Simon Hughes MP, for the Liberal Democrats, said his party cautiously backed the move: “We are nervous about it. We do not like the idea.”

Taken at face value, a measure aimed at depriving neo-fascist groups a propaganda platform might appear to be progressive. But those who are opposed to racism and fascism should ask themselves, how would this restriction help root out racial hatred? Consideration should also be given to the broader democratic ramifications of this measure. It discriminates against all groups and parties critical of the Labour government's social and environmental policies, which are determined by the dictates of big business.

The BNP is the largest neo-fascist group in the country, although according to the anti-fascist monitoring group Searchlight its total membership does not exceed 600. Many of its leading members have convictions for racial violence, incitement to racial hatred, and various arms and explosives offences. Its first electoral breakthrough came in 1993, when Derek Beackon won a seat in the local

council elections in the Isle of Dogs, in London's East End. In the 1997 general election it stood 55 candidates, thus qualifying for an election broadcast on national television.

Although the majority of its candidates fared badly, two candidates in East London captured over 7 percent of the vote. In last month's local council elections, the vote for the far-right averaged around 6.17 percent, if the BNP vote was combined with that of its main competitor, the National Front. In some constituencies the BNP vote was as high as 12 percent and it gained 17 percent in the West Midlands. Its intervention in the June elections for the European Parliament is the largest electoral campaign by a neo-nazi organisation to date in Britain. Running 79 candidates, it qualified for a free mail shot to 15 million homes, and a five-minute broadcast on national TV and radio.

The period in which the BNP has emerged as an electoral entity, from being previously an organisation involved almost exclusively in racist thuggery, coincides with the rightward turn of parliamentary politics. It has long been the stock-in-trade of the far-right to scapegoat immigrants and refugees for all of society's problems. The immigration policies of successive Tory and Labour governments have lent this credibility. From 1993 onwards a series of acts have been passed restricting the right of asylum-seekers to enter Britain and depriving them of welfare benefits. This was introduced amidst press claims that the majority of refugees were "bogus" and threatened to "swamp" the country.

Labour's own Immigration and Asylum Bill being debated in Parliament this week is the most draconian yet. The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI) said of the new legislation, "We note with disappointment that this government has missed a great opportunity to remove the racist thrust of British immigration and asylum policy, and look afresh at positive changes that could benefit British society as a whole. The overall direction of the White Paper is a troubling one, of greater exclusion, restrictions, intelligence gathering, detention and enforcement.... JCWI remains apprehensive that the final details, when they emerge, will lead to worsening standards of human rights and race relations."

The right to asylum is being further restricted on the grounds that most refugees are "economic immigrants" seeking to defraud the British taxpayer. With increasing numbers of people experiencing job insecurity, welfare cuts and higher taxes for the least well-off, this is a deliberate attempt to channel social tensions in a racist

direction. The terms used by government ministers and the mass media to describe refugees play directly into the hands of the BNP. This makes a nonsense of Livingstone's claim that the government and the police can be entrusted to combat the far-right.

The new threshold for elections to the GLA will not be adequate to stop the far-right from gaining representation, judging by their recent election performances. What will happen then? Will the threshold be increased once more? The first organisation disqualified by the Labour government from participating in elections was not from the far-right, but was a left reformist group. The Socialist Party was stopped from standing under its own name under the provisions of the Registration of Political Parties Act, passed last November.

The introduction of an element of Proportional Representation was held up as a move towards a more representative democracy. But these changes have been introduced simultaneously with measures to restrict the range of candidates and parties from which the electorate can choose. Long before the present amendment was mooted, the government Green Paper *New Leadership for London* stated: "It is also important that at the ballot box, electors are not confronted with a lengthy list of candidates which will be cumbersome and difficult to understand. We will need to consider what steps might need to be taken to ensure reasonable candidate lists."

So far, the far right has been able to exploit the pro-business politics of the Labour government and its attacks on welfare by portraying itself in a populist fashion, as the defender of the rights of "white" working people. The consensus which Labour seeks to build with the other parliamentary parties in Westminster—and in the new assemblies for Scotland, Wales, and now London—is designed to stifle any criticism of the profit motive or the growth of social inequality, on the basis of the fight against "extremism". Therefore any measure that secures the political domination of Labour and the other major parties and militates against the development of genuine socialist opposition to them will only win further recruits for the BNP.



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