

English council elections: “Fascist threat” exaggerated to channel support back behind Labour

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Leading Labour politicians have exaggerated the threat represented by the fascist British National Party (BNP) to try to channel support back behind Tony Blair’s discredited government.

In the May 4 elections, Labour ended up in third place, behind the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats. In one of its worst-ever results, the party lost more than 300 seats and control of some 18 local authorities, including 8 in London—half the number it had originally controlled.

Far from provoking a reconsideration of any of the policies behind Labour’s collapse in support, the principal concern of the Labour bureaucracy is to ensure that the overwhelming hostility of working people to Labour’s anti-democratic, pro-war, big business agenda finds no political outlet. To that end, and to justify a further shift to the right, prior to the elections, a faction within the party began talking up the fascist threat supposedly represented by the British National Party (BNP).

In 2004, the BNP had won a by-election victory in London’s Barking and Dagenham area. Its success became the basis for two reports based on opinion poll research by the charitable Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust: “The Far Right in London: A Challenge for Local Democracy” and “The BNP: The Roots of Its Appeal.”

The research work had been requested by London Labour MP and former Health Minister Frank Dobson, and the first report appeared with an epilogue by Dagenham MP Jon Cruddas, a former political secretary to Prime Minister Tony Blair, and a chapter by Nick Lowles, director of research for the anti-fascist organisation Searchlight.

The anti-fascist group and magazine *Searchlight* persuaded Labour MPs from constituencies targeted by the BNP to form “Labour Friends of Searchlight,” and there was a drive to build on the ideas of Labour Chancellor Gordon Brown for reclaiming the national flag, the Union Jack, from the fascists and portraying Labour as the true patriotic party.

The Rowntree Trust reports, which were published in the run-up to the May 4 election, stated that 18 percent of the population nationally and 24 percent in London “would consider” voting for the BNP. At the time of their publication,

Barking MP and Employment Minister Margaret Hodge announced in the right-wing *Sunday Telegraph* that as many as 8 out of 10 people she had spoken to in her east London constituency were “tempted” to vote for the BNP. Cruddas also declared the BNP was on the “verge of a major political breakthrough” and threatened to become a mainstream party.

This became the basis for a campaign by the media and Labour politicians to blame the growth of racism and support for the BNP on the supposedly legitimate grievances of white workers aroused by illegal immigration and false asylum claims, together with welfare policies that supposedly discriminate against the “white working class” and the political correctness brought about by “multiculturalism.” The essential message was that the rise of the BNP could only be halted by adopting its policies.

In reality, despite the huge publicity it was given during the local election campaigns, the BNP remains a small, fringe organisation only able to field 350 candidates in the 4,400 wards that were up for election and winning just 20 new seats.

The BNP targeted Barking and Dagenham and were aided by Hodge’s comments and the oxygen of publicity it attracted for the party. The 11 seats it won in this area were achieved on a vote that averaged just 20 percent of the electorate in each of the wards it contested. In addition, the Liberal Democrats stood no candidates and the Conservatives stood in only one ward. This left voters with a choice between voting for a discredited Labour Party or the BNP (or another right-wing party, the United Kingdom Independence Party)—or abstaining, which 60 percent of the electorate did.

The real role of the BNP is as a stalking horse for the introduction of anti-immigrant and anti-democratic measures by the official parties. This is indicated by the statements of Ann Cryer, Labour MP for Keighley, West Yorkshire, where the BNP has also been active. Initially, Cryer had described Hodge’s comments as “very misguided” and a morale booster for the BNP. But after the election, she claimed that BNP voters “have genuine grievances and frustrations.” Asian gangs “are corrupting our society, flouting our laws and give ammunition to extremist organisations like the BNP,” Cryer said, and were

seen by some people to be “getting away” with it.

The claim by the Labourites that the BNP is accruing ever-greater support because of racist sentiment amongst workers is a gross exaggeration. In reality, in several areas of England where the BNP previously had councillors, such as Calderdale and Bradford in West Yorkshire, it lost seats, and in Oldham, Dudley, Blackburn and Thurrock, the party failed to make its expected breakthrough. In the northeast of England, the BNP vote in wards where the party has stood before has decreased since previous elections.

The *Economist* magazine noted that if Barking and Dagenham were taken out of the picture, the BNP’s results were “mediocre.” Overall, it continued, “the BNP still has fewer councillors than the Green Party, which most deem too small to merit such attention.” Moreover, the BNP were not as successful in Barking and Dagenham as the Respect party led by George Galloway was in nearby Tower Hamlets, where it won 12 seats. No one in the Labour Party or the media, however, has suggested that Labour needs to adopt the type of anti-war, mildly redistributive policies of Respect in order to prove that it is listening to the wishes of the electorate.

It is the role played by Labour in deepening levels of social inequality and deprivation that the BNP has been able to exploit. Moreover, to justify its warmongering in the Middle East and the ongoing attack on democratic rights at home, the government and the media have whipped up fear and panic over Islamic fundamentalism that the BNP has been quick to take up and develop. In a recent court trial for incitement to racial hatred, BNP leaders successfully argued that many of the party’s offensive statements were based on press reports.

Labour’s loss of support in Barking and Dagenham is typical of many inner-city areas. It is one of the most deprived areas in Britain. According to a recent council report, “Building Communities Transforming Lives: A Local Area Agreement Plan,” residents have the lowest average income level in London. Over the last two decades, the borough has witnessed the collapse of its manufacturing base. Employment in the local chemical factories and docks has ended, leaving low-paid service jobs in its place. In 2003, Ford, the biggest employer in the area, announced the end of car production at Dagenham.

The area also has high levels of teenage pregnancies, heart disease, cancer and long-term illness with nearly 20 percent of the population claiming disability benefit. The social services have been “severely challenged by the range of factors which comprise social exclusion and increasing levels of deprivation.” Adults in Barking and Dagenham have the second-lowest level of numeracy and the fourth-lowest level of literacy in the country.

The council report says that the biggest single issue is the provision of adequate housing. However, under the Conservative government of Margaret Thatcher (1979-1990), council houses began to be sold off to their tenants, decreasing the number of houses for rent. The situation has not been

rectified by Labour, with the number of council houses in England decreasing from 25,081, when the party came to power in 1997, to 16,737 in 2004-2005. The director of the housing charity Shelter, Adam Sampson, has said there is no sign since the election that social housing would be a top priority for the government, adding, “We have looked in vain since the local elections for a sign in the [cabinet] reshuffle that the government has seriously accepted that housing is now a mainstream political issue again.”

The so-called anti-fascist campaign is aimed at covering over the central political issue raised by Labour’s transformation into the open representative of big business—the need for the building of a new, genuinely socialist workers party. At the very point where this question emerges as a practical necessity for working people, a coalition of Labourites and left anti-racist groups seeks to dragoon workers and youth back behind the Labour Party, claiming that this is the basis for defeating the rise of the extreme right.

Cruddas has praised the “new Popular Front politics [that] is developing as anti-fascists and church groups, local union branches, voluntary groups and political parties come together to confront the new threat.” In Barking and Dagenham, *Searchlight* campaigned under the slogan “Hope will triumph over hate” and drafted in anti-racist campaigners to help “fill the vacuum” left by the collapse in any active support for the local Labour Party. It targeted the black and minority ethnic population, saying, “For some of us that means holding our noses and voting, but vote we must.”

London Mayor Ken Livingstone’s Unite Against Fascism organisation, which is supported by Labour, the Tories and Liberal Democrats, the Trades Unions Congress and the Socialist Workers Party, also urged people to “turn out and vote for anyone but the BNP.”

In working class areas, this was little more than an ultimatum to vote Labour. Its impact was to demobilise the vast majority of workers who are rightly hostile to Labour but have nothing but contempt for the BNP, leaving only the minority of more politically backward workers with the possibility of registering a protest vote for the far right.



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