

The British National Party and “Question Time”

Julie Hyland

22 October 2009

Media lawyers this week rejected a warning by Welsh Secretary Peter Hain that the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) could face legal action if it allowed Nick Griffin, leader of the British National Party, to appear on its flagship “Question Time” programme, scheduled for this evening.

Hain had argued that the far-right party was effectively “illegal,” after the Equality and Human Rights Commission began county court proceedings against it on the grounds that its “whites only” membership policy breached race relations laws. The action was halted after Griffin agreed to put a revised constitution to the party next month and suspended recruitment in the interim period.

Hain’s threat was the latest in a near hysterical campaign by a section of the Labour Party, including potential leadership challenger Alan Johnson, the *Guardian* newspaper and pseudo-left groups such as the Socialist Workers Party, to denounce Griffin’s appearance.

With plans for a demonstration outside the BBC HQ by Unite Against Fascism (UAF)—an umbrella organisation of Labourites, the Trades Union Congress and the SWP, that is also supported by the Conservatives and others—there has been talk for weeks of the programme being filmed in a “secret location” guarded by a heavy police presence.

That many workers and young people find Griffin and his organisation’s politics of race hatred repugnant is entirely healthy. But this politically inexperienced opposition is being directed towards demands for state and media sanctions against the BNP for not following “legitimate democratic” norms and used to sanctify the official establishment parties as the rightful representatives of public opinion.

The *Socialist Worker*, which heads the UAF, claims that the BBC’s invite “flies in the face of its responsibilities as a public service broadcaster.”

This is a whitewash of the BBC, the official mouthpiece of British imperialism in whose “service” alone it propagandises day in and day out. It also lends credence to the broadcaster’s argument that as a “public service

broadcaster” it is obliged to feature Griffin. As the BNP won two seats in June’s elections to the European Parliament and has some 50 local councillors in the UK, the BBC cannot “apply different standards to different parties because of their particular policies,” the broadcaster has stated.

In reality, the BNP leader’s participation on “Question Time” is only the latest in many appearances he has made on the BBC, especially over the last year, and he is regularly interviewed on all the major news channels.

Griffin’s rise to public prominence has little to do with democratic “inclusion” and everything to do with a pronounced shift to the right amongst the entire political establishment, including its supposedly “liberal” representatives.

They regard the BNP as a useful tool for inculcating anti-immigrant prejudice in order to divert the rising social anger generated by the economic crisis away from its real target—the parasitic financial oligarchy and its political representatives that have plundered the social assets and living standards of working people for their own self-enrichment.

In March 2008, for example, the BBC commissioned a so-called “White Season” of programming. Under the heading, “Is white working-class Britain becoming invisible?” its aim was to assert that political alienation and economic insecurity amongst “white” workers was bound up with issues of race and a sense of betrayal produced by the “liberal nostrums” of multiculturalism and “political correctness.”

The BBC acted throughout as a conduit for the type of propaganda that is the bread-and-butter of the BNP. Indeed, Griffin participated in the BBC discussion panel on its “White Season” without any protest. The series was greeted enthusiastically by the media. Writing in the *Financial Times*, under the headline “White men unburdened,” John Lloyd welcomed the fact that “A cultural movement is happening within liberal opinion. It no longer greets immigrants with open arms.” Notions of “assimilation, cultural diversity and mutual tolerance” were “now in

contest,” he wrote, including in “Britain’s most important cultural institution, the BBC.”

The *World Socialist Web Site* explained at the time, “From the Labour Party’s role as the chief ally of the Bush administration in the US and its doctrine of preemptive war, to the campaign by supporters of the *New Statesman* and the Euston Manifesto group against the ‘appeasement’ of Islamic fundamentalism, former pacifists and leftists have become transformed into political apologists for free-market capitalism and so-called liberal imperialism.”

It is the BNP’s repeated attack on Islam as being “incompatible with democracy” that has particularly earned it airspace. Its talk of a “clash of civilisations” repeats in unadulterated form the claims made by the ruling elite in Britain, the United States and elsewhere to justify their predatory wars of colonial conquest in Afghanistan and Iraq and condition public opinion for even more brutal interventions against countries such as Iran.

At the same time, the BNP has been able to exploit the political disaffection caused by Labour’s big business agenda and the tremendous growth in class inequalities this has caused to posture as an “anti-establishment” party. In turn the “establishment” has portrayed it as an expression of the legitimate grievances of “white workers” to again further its own reactionary agenda.

Not a word of this is mentioned by the UAF and others involved in the anti-BNP protests. In calling for a type of “cordon sanitaire” to be placed around Griffin, they bolster the credentials of the likes of Labour’s Justice Secretary Jack Straw who has said he will use his “Question Time” appearance to expose the BNP as “far-right extremists” intent on causing “immense harm in what is otherwise the most tolerant country in the world.”

Straw has no right to lecture anyone. As home secretary, he piloted Britain’s draconian anti-terror laws that severely curtail democratic rights. As foreign secretary, he was directly responsible for the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq that has caused tens of thousands of deaths, and led the campaign of lies and disinformation used to justify it.

In 2006, Straw mounted an anti-Muslim provocation of his own, penning a newspaper article in which he denounced women wearing the veil—or niqab—for undermining social cohesion.

As for the Conservative’s representative on “Question Time,” Lady Sayeeda Warsi, she has previously opined that immigration into the UK is “out of control” and that BNP supporters “have some very legitimate views.”

In her speech to this year’s Conservative Party conference, she accused “multicultural” polices of “failing Britain” and attacked the supposed undermining of the Christian religion, saying that, “Strong societies are built on cherishing their

heritage.”

The Conservative Party itself has joined an extreme right-wing coalition in the European parliament that includes sympathisers of the Nazi SS and anti-Semites.

It is a sign of how far to the right official politics has moved that, according to the *Observer*’s Nick Cohen (himself a signatory to the Euston Manifesto—a pro-imperialist rant against Islam), the BBC had originally booked Douglas Murray from the think tank Centre for Social Cohesion to appear alongside Griffin. As “he is also from the right,” Cohen wrote, the broadcaster had initially reasoned that Murray “could tell the audience that it was possible to worry about immigration without being compelled to vote BNP.” But the BBC had “second thoughts,” fearing that should Murray “say anything in favour of immigration controls, Griffin would look like he was the voice of consensus.”

An aspect of the concerns now being expressed by Hain, Johnson and others over Griffin’s appearance on “Question Time” is the fear that it will reveal just how little really separates a quasi-fascist organisation from the “legitimate” official parties.

This goes to the heart of the political lie on which the current anti-BNP protests are being mobilised: that racism and fascism can be fought through appeals to the institutions and representatives of bourgeois rule to “uphold” democracy.

The rhetorical cries of *No Pasarán* only conceals the politically putrid state of parliamentary democracy in Britain and disarms workers and youth as to the real source of the fascist threat—the advanced preparations by the ruling elite for a savage offensive against the living standards and democratic rights of working people. In demanding state proscriptions against the BNP, moreover, the UAF and its backers are colluding with the state and legitimising anti-democratic measures whose ultimate target is the workers’ movement itself.

The struggle against reaction and in defence of civil liberties can only be carried forward by a politically conscious and combative working class, as part of the struggle against the capitalist profit system, its state apparatus and its political representatives. What is required is not diversionary and bankrupt protest stunts and sloganeering, but the building of a new socialist party to lead this fight.



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact