



**BNP Briefing Paper\_  
A Church Response  
Revised for the May 2006  
Local Elections**

April 2006

## Introduction\_

Experience shows that the BNP continue to exploit situations of social unrest to gain support, not least during local and national elections.

However, lessons learnt living and working on the Isle of Dogs when the BNP were active in the early 1990s show that communities can come together and people can learn to live in peace and harmony. More recently, communities such as Beeston in Leeds have continued to promote inter-faith relations and partnership working for the shared good of all residents despite attempts through 'smash and grab' media tactics and opportunistic political extremists to incite racial and religious division (see Revd Neil Bishop's story, below right).

Since this briefing paper was first published for the local elections in spring 2004, the need for churches to take an active role in their communities to respond to political extremism has become more apparent. The BNP received unprecedented election success gaining many seats in local elections, and polled well in the European elections although there were no seats won. The BNP currently has 19 local councillors across England, and wants to focus in areas where it has polled well including Yorkshire and the Humber. Recent publicity has focussed on the BNP's aim to "Defend Christian Values" whilst stirring up fear of Islam.

How can the church actively reduce the impact of such groups? A skilled and co-ordinated response is necessary to offset the impact of political extremism and the easy and destructive answers to complex questions that they offer. This paper outlines the latest issues relevant to the 2006 campaign, provides information on planning an effective response and stories from across the region to inspire.

Thanks to Peter Lazenby of the Yorkshire Evening Post and Inderjit Bhogal, Director of the Yorkshire and Humber Faiths Forum and many others who continue to work to promote unity and have also contributed to this paper.

Liz Carnelley  
Acting Chief Executive  
Churches Regional Commission  
for Yorkshire and the Humber

*"Christians need to question candidates and to use their vote wisely."* Revd John Kennedy,  
Churches Together in Britain & Ireland

### A Positive Voice for Faiths

Christians, Muslims and people of other faiths and beliefs gathered outside the Stratford Street osque, Beeston on Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> February for a symbolic show of unity. "The intention was to express our solidarity and respect for one another's faiths," said the Revd Neil Bishop, local Methodist minister and Secretary of Faith Together in Leeds 11. The silent vigil was organised in response to the BNP's use of faith as a target in their political agenda, and in response to the publishing of cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad. The vigil received extensive media coverage of local faith leaders expressing their unity and respect. Visit [www.yorkshireandhumberfaiths.org.uk](http://www.yorkshireandhumberfaiths.org.uk) to read the full press release.

## Why is the BNP attracting support? \_

1. The BNP respond to genuine local grievances, such as the end of funding for a project in a white area in Mixenden, or the lack of affordable housing on the Isle of Dogs. They often have success on the 'forgotten' white areas, where people feel no one is listening to them. And there is often a lack of "safe space" for such people to air their feelings – they struggle to find a language/a place to say what they want without being thought racist.

2. The BNP often find support in a context of significant problems: high unemployment, deprivation, lack of educational achievement, a vacuum of credible leadership/ a time of unstable politics, high crime/drugs, and people of different ethnic backgrounds living separate lives which encourages the growth of myths and rumour. Currently they are exploiting faith tensions. One leaflet asks voters, "Are you concerned about the growth of Islam in Britain? Make May 4<sup>th</sup> referendum day." It adds, "Defend Our Christian Culture." There has been poor coverage by some national and local media who add to the problems and tensions by irresponsible reporting.

*"We need to help rebuild a sense of unity in community that offers hope for the future, drawing people away from the politics of despair and hate."*  
Bishop of Bradford, Synod Address  
Feb 2005

3. When the BNP target a bye-election they bus in people from all over to canvass. The BNP are highly organised. In Illingworth the local vicar says that while gangs went out leafleting, another gang went around preventing other groups leafleting by being intimidating. On the Isle of Dogs they made threatening phone calls

to the church office and were physically and verbally aggressive. In March 2005 a BNP activist was sent to prison for smashing windows, slashing tyres and putting fireworks through the doors of "black bastards". Many BNP leaders have criminal records for racial attacks. We make a mistake if we see them as a party like others.

*"The policies and practices of those who promote racism and racial intolerance are incompatible with the Methodist Church's social witness, biblical teaching and our understanding of the love of God for all people."* The Methodist Council

4. Their arrival also heralds the arrival of the Anti-Nazi League who also bus people in, are intimidating and write up graffiti. They can be difficult partners (their slogan is SMASH THE BNP) and can make local people feel more antagonistic to those working against the BNP as local people can resent their involvement and arrival.

## What are they doing now? \_

The BNP has won a worryingly high number of votes in local and European elections in recent years. In Yorkshire it has three Councillors in Bradford, three in Calderdale, and one in Kirklees. In European elections it polled 800,000 votes, including more than 100,000 in Yorkshire. The BNP currently have 19 local council seats. This success has given them credibility, and a seat at the table, which ties the hands of local government staff who must work for them as for anyone else. They are now part of "the Council".

However, it is worth noting that the BNP lost a seat in Burnley in 2004 when one candidate resigned after a public order offence, and another seat was won by the Lib Dems in a bye-election in Calderdale despite a BNP campaign to take it, due to concerted community activity and a high turnout.

Keighley's March 2006 by-election held after its BNP councillor Angela Clark stood down has reduced the seats held by the BNP on Bradford Council to three. Labour's Angela Sinfield won with a majority of only 603 over the BNP candidate followed by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat candidates. Angela Sinfield, who turned to politics because she feels the BNP exploited her daughter's ordeal of being groomed for sex by a local gang by misrepresenting it as a racial issue to win votes, described the result as a victory over extremism.

(see article

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/guardianpolitics/story/0,,1737270,00.html>)

The BNP hope to do well in the 2006 local elections following on from the acquittal of leader Nick Griffin on incitement charges trial. They also gained significant profile during the 2005 general elections, qualifying for political broadcast time alongside mainstream political parties. Whilst seats may not have been won, they polled well and did much to succeed in their strategy to "build up hopes and the chance of a bigger breakthrough for us in the local elections of 2006" (Nick Griffin, 21<sup>st</sup> February 2005)

*"As Church Leaders in Leeds we affirm our care for our Muslim brothers and sisters. We are determined to work with them to develop communities in our city which build on our common belief in God's concern for all humanity. We deplore insults to any religion, and actions and words which offend deeply held beliefs. As Christians we offer respect to the faith of others. And we call upon everyone of good will to work together for peace in our city and country."* West Yorkshire Ecumenical Council Feb 2006

## A White Christmas?

During the trial of Nick Griffin in Leeds, members of the "Christian Council of Britain" – a BNP organisation – supported Griffin with placards and Christian symbols (see front cover pictures). They were singing, "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas..." Inderjit Bhogal, Director of the Yorkshire and Humber Faiths Forum approached these supporters and asked them, "Where do I fit into your vision of Britain?" "You don't!" was their reply. He also asked them, "How many of you go to church?" They confirmed that none of them did.

Inderjit says, "We need to make racial and religious hatred utterly disrespectful. People of all faiths need to stand together at this time, work together to build relationships of respect and trust and not allow those who convey hatred to divide and separate us. Let us work towards a Britain where we all belong equally."

## What does the BNP stand for?

In recent years the BNP has tried to present itself as a "respectable" alternative to the mainstream parties, yet its manifesto is openly based on racism. For example, if elected, BNP Councillors are committed to removing halal and kosher food from school dinner menus. The BNP justifies this proposed victimisation of Muslim and Jewish children by saying it is opposed to animal cruelty. The BNP is also committed to introducing quota systems on the issuing of licences to private hire firms and off-licences. This would deprive thousands of Asian people in Yorkshire of their livelihoods. The BNP's declared policy is "an immediate halt to all non-white immigration" and "the voluntary re-settlement" of non-whites to "their lands of native origin." BNP Nick

Griffin has described the Holocaust as the "holohoax," denying the deaths of millions of Jewish people in Nazi gas chambers. The BNP is making direct attempts to win over Christians. It has established a "front" organisation, the "Christian Council of Britain".

Supporters during Nick Griffin's trial brandished placards stating "Defending Christian Values." One wore a clerical dog collar, though he refused to say which church he represented. See story on previous page. In response to the activities of the Christian Council of Britain, Anthea Cox, Methodist Coordinating Secretary for Public Life and Social Justice, said, "I am outraged that the BNP and its allies are using Christianity to further their agenda of segregation and division. We are deeply concerned that some people are now appropriating Christian language and symbols for policies that are the very opposite of Christian values." (see <http://www.cofe.org/news/pr3306a.html>)

## What kind of people vote BNP?

We need to be careful not to demonise people – many people vote as a protest – they are not being heard. They are often the disadvantaged who resent others receiving more. It does not mean they are signed up Nazis. And we will find these people in our churches. Further, some areas with strong BNP tendencies are not always particularly mixed race communities and not always poor – e.g. Saddleworth in Oldham, Heanor in Derbyshire, Queensbury near Bradford, around Clitheroe near Blackburn. These are where people have moved out to, to avoid living in predominantly Asian areas, which they associate with poverty.

*"We must look instead for political leadership that is committed to healing divisions, bridging differences and creating truly inclusive community."*

The Catholic Bishops' Conference

Peter Lazenby of the Yorkshire Evening Post and anti-facist activist writes, "Wherever the British National Party surfaces, decent people come together to oppose its racism and extremism. This is the case across our region. Many local anti-racism and anti-facism groups involve Christians who are prepared to unite with Muslims and people of other faiths, and people of no faith, to oppose the BNP in a simple way - by telling the truth about the BNP and what it stands for. They do this through door to door leafleting, holding public meetings, producing publicity material. Days of action are planned by the BNP in all five districts of West Yorkshire, and across the county, in areas where the BNP is standing candidates. The days of action involve mass leafleting of areas targeted by the BNP."

See Useful Information on page 6 for information on local anti-racism groups in your area

*"This synod commit the Church of England to work in partnership ...in building cohesive communities and affirming our multi-ethnic, culturally and religiously diverse society."*

Church of England General Synod  
Feb 2005

## What can we do?

A skilled and co-ordinated response is necessary:

- We need to give out facts and figures to contradict the myths and rumours: e.g. asylum seekers are flooding the UK
- Working with the media and local press is vital
- Events need to bring people together who otherwise wouldn't meet – a visit to a mosque, faith forums etc.
- There needs to be spaces to raise hard issues and let people be heard
- People need to turn out and vote – a higher vote means less chance of a BNP victory. On the Isle of Dogs transport was arranged to polling booths.

*"In the end the BNP is only going to be defeated at the ballot box, not by banning them. I will encourage everybody to exercise their democratic right to vote."*  
Archbishop Sentamu

- Other political parties need to be encouraged not to "play the race card"
- The Church needs to say that it does not support the BNP since they often claim that they are Christian.
- Statements from faith leaders promoting racial/religious harmony can be useful
- Local events can change the mood – prayers for peace, school events.
- The rainbow ribbons for peace campaign which originated from the Isle of Dogs campaign in 2003 /04, has also been used in the region as a visible symbol of unity to support the idea of people of different races and backgrounds living together.

Bradford Vision ran a Rainbow Ribbons campaign as a symbol of a celebration of the diversity of the Bradford District involving people from all communities and faiths and of all ages.

Liz Hanney, Diversity Exchange Development Worker explains, "Wearing the ribbon symbolised a shared hope and celebration of all the diversity of the district. This then included, not just people of different ethnicities but also people from the rural areas and the inner-city, people of different nationalities, people of different ages, people of different sexualities and people with disabilities."

Bradford vision can be contacted for rainbow ribbons tel. 01274 431262

[www.bradforddiversityexchange.com](http://www.bradforddiversityexchange.com)  
(undergoing redevelopment)

## A theology for inclusion\_

Founder of the Christian Council of Britain, Revd Robert West has asserted at BNP events that God is opposed to people of different nations living together in communities. However, the bible begins with an affirmation that all people are made in the image of God which means that we are all sacred and unique and special and to be treated with respect. It is also a common biblical theme that when God enjoins the Jewish people to care for the orphan and the widow they are also instructed to care “for the stranger or alien among you” – “because you were slaves once in Egypt” (Deut. 24: 14 – 22). Further, the fruits of the land are to be shared by all – “you and the Levites and the aliens among you shall rejoice in all the good things the Lord your God has given” (Deut. 26:).

It is at Pentecost when people of many nations and languages hear the words of God (Acts 2: 7-12). This means that the division of humanity into different nations at Babel is reversed (Gen. 11: 1 – 9). All are encompassed in the Kingdom of God as one family.

It is perhaps Jesus’ most famous parable, the Good Samaritan, which asserts that people of different ethnic backgrounds and beliefs have a duty of care for one another. It is the outsider– the Samaritan – who shows compassion for the stranger. Jesus himself was a stranger in a foreign land when his family sought refuge in Egypt and relied on the kindness of strangers (Matthew 2: 13 – 15)

It is a Christian imperative that people of different communities and languages live together in harmony and peace – indeed it is a vision for the Kingdom of God realised on Earth when “peoples from every tribe and language and people and nation” are joined together in praise of God (Revelation 6: 9 - 10).

### A Prayer for Unity

*Lord God, who made humanity into a wonderful and diverse family, and whose son Jesus was born as a Jew; strengthen us by your Spirit to proclaim that we are Children of the same heavenly Father, created in your image, beloved and blessed brothers and sisters. Amen*

# Useful Information\_

## Resources and Advice for Churches:

Resources for countering political extremism

<http://www.methodist.org.uk/index.cfm?fuseaction=news.content&cmid=1051>

Practical resources including organising an election forum

[www.makethecrosscount.com](http://www.makethecrosscount.com)

Practical tools for political engagement

[www.changeactivist.org](http://www.changeactivist.org)

Churches Together in Britain and Northern Ireland, briefing paper

[http://www.ctbi.org.uk/downloads/ccrj/bnp\\_election\\_briefing.pdf](http://www.ctbi.org.uk/downloads/ccrj/bnp_election_briefing.pdf)

Briefing paper on destitute asylum seekers

<http://www.crc-online.org.uk/papers.asp?slid=86&mid=90>

support and advice on working with other faiths

<http://www.touchstone-bradford.org.uk/index.htm>

## Other church websites:

[www.keepthefaith.co.uk](http://www.keepthefaith.co.uk)

[www.catholic-ew.org.uk](http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk)

[www.urc.org.uk](http://www.urc.org.uk)

[www.cofe.anglican.org](http://www.cofe.anglican.org)

[www.ctbi.org.uk](http://www.ctbi.org.uk). (tel. 0207654 7228)

[www.baptist.org.uk](http://www.baptist.org.uk)

## Political websites:

[www.christiansinpolitics.co.uk](http://www.christiansinpolitics.co.uk)

<http://www.conservatives.com/>

[www.labour.org.uk](http://www.labour.org.uk)

[www.libdems.org.uk](http://www.libdems.org.uk)

[www.obv.org.uk](http://www.obv.org.uk) (Operation Black Vote)

[www.bnp.org.uk](http://www.bnp.org.uk)

## Other:

BBC Politics homepage with links to election information and current stories

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/default.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/default.stm)

BNP's Christian Council of Britain website

[www.christiancouncil.org.uk](http://www.christiancouncil.org.uk)

Information on local anti-racism groups in your area can be obtained from:

[www.searchlightmagazine.com](http://www.searchlightmagazine.com) or [www.uaf.org.uk](http://www.uaf.org.uk)

Information on local campaigning

[www.stopthebnp.org.uk](http://www.stopthebnp.org.uk)

Bradford Anti-racist website.

Information, activities and projects that recognise the existence of racism in the District, and that aim to help eradicate it

[www.barp.yorks.com](http://www.barp.yorks.com)

Please let us know of other information, resources and websites so that this section can be updated.

Contact: [info@crc-online.org.uk](mailto:info@crc-online.org.uk)