



Exorcising extremist ideologies

Elena Jurado

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In allowing uncertainty to govern the response to the BNP, politicians are missing a vital chance to rein back their support and expose the racist ideology which drives them

As the date of the next parliamentary election approaches, MPs of all political stripes need to decide – ideally in a coordinated manner – how to respond to the rising popularity of the BNP. MPs are right to be worried about the impact of the BNP in their constituencies. Some observers have tried to dismiss the problem by pointing out that the BNP's 6 per cent share in last summer's European elections was artificially high as a result of the record low turnout. However, with polls continuing to show high levels of voter apathy, there is a real risk that a BNP member of parliament will be walking into the House of Commons this coming May.

Since last autumn, when BNP leader Nick Griffin was invited to appear on BBC's Question Time, the Labour Party continues to be divided on the best approach to take, with some MPs defending the need to confront the BNP in an open debate, and others refusing to share a platform with the anti-immigrant party. This disunity is sapping the Labour party's legitimacy and strengthening the popularity of the nationalist party. It must be stopped.

All the signs suggest that the political current is moving in the direction of engagement. Last week, when Geert Wilders, the anti-Islamic Dutch MP, visited London to screen his *Fitna* film, - which denounces Islam as a "totalitarian" religion – the silence echoing through the corridors of Whitehall was deafening. While more than 150 right-wing extremist and anti-fascist demonstrators gathered outside the House of Lords, where the film was being screened, there was a notable absence of any statement on the issue from government. Let us not forget that the decision of the Immigration and Asylum Tribunal overturning the former Home Secretary's refusal to allow Geert Wilders entry into the UK was issued in October last year; the government had enough time to appeal the decision, but chose not to. Was the threat that Wilders was deemed to represent to "community harmony and public security" last year no longer present? Hardly. Rather, the feeling seems to be that whatever the legal merits of banning Wilders, politically it would only serve to make matters worse, feeding Wilders' claims of being "demonized" by the political establishment. Music to the ears of his supporters.

In a new paper published by Policy Network this week for the occasion of a conference in Copenhagen on “Migration and the rise of nationalist right-wing parties: confrontation, isolation or engagement,” [Montserrat Guibernau](#) offers an intellectual justification for this position. She criticises mainstream parties for dismissing the new radical right as fanatical parties operating on the fringe of politics, and calls on them to take the discourse of these parties more seriously “to understand why the radical right has been able to strike a chord with the electorate”.

There is no doubt that a closer examination of the causes and consequences of the rise of right-wing extremism across Europe is in order, and Guibernau’s paper advances our understanding in important ways. She shows, for example, that new radical right parties in the Netherlands, Denmark and France have successfully re-framed their discourse in an attempt to shed their fascist image and establish themselves as “respectable” parties. They decry racism while remaining vehemently anti-immigration by depicting themselves as “true democrats”, concerned about the survival of our liberal values and welfare state in the face of the Muslim “invasion”.

One can understand why mainstream parties feel overwhelmed in the face of this challenge. Given continental Europe’s much longer history of right-wing extremism, it also makes sense that our mainstream politicians look abroad to learn from the experience of their European colleagues. However, if lessons are to be learned from other countries, this comparative analysis must be conducted with caution. Each European country has a different history of right-wing extremism and therefore, although the social and political problems they face are similar, trying to develop a single strategy or response to the far right for all of Europe is bound to fail.

As Guibernau explains in her paper, the popularity of the far right reflects a deep economic and social malaise affecting western European societies. The rapid economic changes brought about by globalisation have caused widespread insecurity and a sense of powerlessness which governments will need to address. But when far right parties mobilise their voters on these issues, they do so in ways that reflect local conditions and particularities. When mainstream parties design their response strategies, they must take these differences into account.

In Britain, right wing extremists are a very different beast to their Danish, Dutch or French counterparts. In the last elections in the Netherlands, Geert Wilders party attracted the support of 5.9 per cent of the public (9 seats), a share which is predicted to increase to 24 seats in the upcoming parliamentary elections. In the UK, according to various polls, BNP voters are widely believed to fluctuate around 2 percentage points, a number which will find difficulty overcoming the barriers of Britain’s first-past-the post electoral system. But this does not mean that right-wing extremism does not represent a threat in British politics. As Matthew J Goodwin explains in his recent study of the extreme right in Britain, “disproportionate systems might even encourage far-right support, as a result of reinforcing the “outsider” status of the party and the “protest” nature of the vote.”

Rather, the point to be taken from the relative weakness of the BNP, and from the political incompetence of its leader, is that it is not too late to rein back their support through a concerted campaign, backed by all mainstream parties, to expose the racist ideology which continues to

drive them. But, critically, the duty to close ranks against the BNP and openly confront it through all democratic means is not only on political parties. The rest of society, including the media, must also rise to the challenge, including by identifying and disseminating evidence to discredit the BNP efforts to disown their links with proscribed, openly-racist and violent groups such as the English Defence League.

Elena Jurado is head of research at Policy Network and leads the work programme on “Managing migration in times of economic turbulence”