

A 'Typical' Case? The political breakthrough of the British National Party (BNP) in Burnley

(James Rhodes, University of Manchester)

Introduction

Between 2001 and 2003, Burnley earned infamy as “the unofficial racist capital of Britain” (Harris and Wazir, 2002). In 2001, the BNP polled over 10 per cent in the General Election, while just a few weeks later the town was beset by a weekend of urban unrest as white and ‘Asian’ communities clashed with both each other and the police. The following summer, the BNP gained its first elected representatives for almost a decade. By the end of summer 2003, the BNP had eight local councillors, making it the principle opposition to the ruling Labour Group. The ‘riots’ and the emergence of the BNP as a political force were treated in a similar way by local Labour politicians; there was an attempt to deny that Burnley was a ‘racist’ town, and to differentiate happenings in Burnley from the violence in nearby Oldham. They were viewed with a sense of shock and surprise. However, it is clear that the events marked the culmination of a spiraling sense of political disaffection and resentment which had emerged during the 1990s. Between June 2004 and March 2005, 16 interviews were conducted with BNP voters, and a further two with ex-BNP candidates. Drawing on these accounts, and substantial archival research, this paper outlines the key factors behind the BNP breakthrough: growing political disaffection within a context of high socio-economic deprivation; the weakness of the mainstream political parties and the politicization of ‘race’; and the actions of the BNP itself. The discussion will conclude with an examination of the extent to which it can be viewed as a ‘typical’ case of far right breakthrough.

Disaffection and Deprivation

Politically, Burnley has always been a Labour heartland. However, by the early-1990s a tangible sense of apathy was emerging in the town. In the summer of 1992, riots raged as youths clashed with the police across a number of white,

working-class social housing estates. In one of the wards which experienced disturbances that summer, a Labour councilor was elected unopposed, while in another the turnout was less than 25 per cent highlighting the desperately poor state of local democracy. It seems fair to state that this apathy has developed since this time as the Labour vote has spectacularly collapsed. In the 1997, General Election, Peter Pike was returned to parliament as Labour MP with a majority of 17,062. However, by 2005 when Kitty Ussher was elected as MP, the majority was just 5,778, down almost 50 per cent from 2001. This was also reflected within local elections. In 1999, a poor turnout meant that just 12.6 per cent of voters had registered their support for the local Labour Group, which maintained control of the council¹. In the 2000 local elections, Labour lost complete control of the council for the first time in thirty years. BNP voters were keen to register their disaffection with the local council, with one portraying their support for the BNP as “a kick up the arse to them [Labour council]”. There emerged in Burnley a sense that a loyal electorate had been taken for granted by an incompetent administration. The council’s reputation was not helped by a newspaper article which in April 2000, just before the local elections, declared it to be the worst in the country². Similarly, the report into the 2001 riots observed the way in which the body’s failure to communicate effectively with residents had “led to the general impression of a remote and uncaring council” (Burnley Task Force, 2001:61).

This spiraling disaffection took place within a town that was suffering acutely from the collapse of its manufacturing base. In the late-nineteenth century, Burnley could count itself as the central hub of the global textile industry, producing more than any other town in the world. However, since the 1950s in particular the industry has become all but obsolete. In 2003, less than 1500 people were employed within textile production³. In that time, wages fell and manufacturing

¹ *Burnley Express*, May 14th 1999.

² *Burnley Express*, April 21st 2000.

³ <http://www.lancashire.gov.uk/environment/lancashireprofile/sectors/textile2.asp>. (Accessed December 10th 2005).

jobs were replaced by low-paid, often part-time work within a service-based economy. Approximately one-third of all jobs in Burnley employ on just a part-time basis (Burnley Borough Council, 2005:5). This has led to a situation in the town where there is a collective sense that the town had lost out. Much of the disaffection also seemed to relate to the fact that the situation in the town appeared to have worsened since Labour had returned to power in the 1997 General Election. The Indices of Deprivation 2004, ranked Burnley as the 37th most deprived district in the country (ODPM, 2004:115), compared to a rank of 46th in 2000 (Burnley Borough Council, 2005:9). Between 1998 and 2001, approximately 30 per cent of the remaining manufacturing jobs in Burnley were lost (ibid: 21). Similarly, average wages in the town gained an increasing disparity with national earnings. In 1999, 46.8 per cent of households in Burnley earned a gross income of less than £15,000, but by 2002 this had risen to 56.8%, almost 12 per cent higher than levels for the country as a whole (ibid: 10). This can be seen as indicative of the fact that in 2002, approximately one-quarter of the town's working population had no qualifications (ibid: 22). The most visible manifestation of the town's demise lies in the housing stock. A net outflow in terms of population has meant that Burnley has one of the lowest demands for housing in the country. In 2001, 4,000 properties lay vacant, and over a quarter of houses were deemed unfit for habitation (Burnley Task Force, 2001:7, 41). This housing surplus has had a massive impact upon house prices, and has left some owners in negative equity. Furthermore, the value of property in Burnley rose at just a third the rate for England and Wales between 1999 and 2003 (Burnley Borough Council, 2005:27).

This sense of socio-economic decline appeared regularly within the accounts of BNP voters. An elderly BNP supporter, previously employed within the manufacturing industry, stated that there was no more "boom" in Burnley, just "one long bust". It is interesting to note that while this sense of decline was shared by both BNP and non-BNP voters alike, it appeared to be felt more acutely amongst the former. The Electoral Reform Society (ERS) survey, carried

out in 2003, found that more than 9 out of 10 BNP voters felt that Burnley had declined, compared to around three-quarters of those that supported other parties (Deacon et al, 2004:14). It was clear that for many BNP voters the failure to address this deprivation was the responsibility of both the local and national Labour administrations. There was a widespread belief amongst the BNP voters interviewed that the town had been neglected. There was a strong sense amongst Labour supporters that the party had abandoned its traditional constituents. This attitude was best illustrated by the views of a former manufacturing worker in his early-sixties. During his time working in local factories he had been a shop steward and a staunch Labour supporter, however, he felt that his support for the party had been stretched too far by the combination of a complacent, ineffective local council and the emergence of New Labour which he viewed as “the Tory Party in another disguise”. He felt that many traditional Labour supporters had been driven to the BNP because of the changing nature of the Labour Party both locally and nationally;

“99 per cent of the people that vote for them [BNP] here are so gutted by the Labour party’s action and everything they’ve done in every single way that they’re so gutted that they’d vote for anybody”.

The interviewee continued to express his disappointment in New Labour, citing the actions of the party as a key factor in his decision to vote BNP;

“I’m gonna vote for them [BNP], if its voting against Labour I’ll vote for *anybody*, and I’ve never voted in a general election for anybody but Labour, I were brought up in the old Labour tradition, which are nothing like New Labour, not at all”.

This sense of apathy and disaffection exhibited towards Labour was compounded by the weakness of both the Tories and the Liberal Democrats. In the 2002 local elections, the year in which the BNP first gained elected representatives in Burnley, the Conservatives contested just 9 of 45 seats, with the Liberal Democrats putting up just 16 candidates (Brooks, 2002:53). While in 2003, the year in which the BNP secured seven elected representatives, the largest numerical shift was from Labour voters to BNP, proportionally the most

significant movement was from the Conservatives to the BNP (Deacon et al, 2004). In the vast majority of the electoral wards in Burnley, the Tories represent something of a political non-entity. For BNP voters from the more affluent wards, the party was seen as posing a more realistic challenge to Labour. Voters who had shifted their support from the Conservatives to the BNP bemoaned the ineffectiveness of the Tories, and the extent to which support for the party was effectively a wasted vote. One BNP voter, a manager at a local factory, suggested that the legacy of Thatcher's era and the Labour roots of Burnley, meant that a vote for the BNP was perhaps deemed more 'socially acceptable' than one for the Conservatives;

“they [BNP] then introduced people to another option [besides voting for Labour] which was almost voting the opposite way...people in the street or with their friends or whatever wouldn't want to be seen as sort of being a Tory for example, because that wasn't the thing to do, you were from a northern industrial town and you don't vote Tory, this [BNP vote] was seen to be, not socially acceptable, but probably acceptable by your peer groups”.

Although the Liberal Democrats represent a much more credible political force in the town than the Conservatives, indeed for at least the past decade they have regularly been the largest opposition group, the actions of the party have been capitalised upon by the BNP. In the year prior to 2002, when the BNP had 3 councillors elected, the local Labour and Liberal Democrat groups reached a power-sharing agreement leaving the Conservatives as effectively the only opposition in the town, a party with no prospects of being elected in Burnley. Similarly, in two by-elections contested by the BNP in November 2001, the Liberals urged its supporters to vote for Labour in order to keep the BNP out. In response, Steven Smith, the leading BNP activist stated that such a move simply highlighted the 'redundancy' of the Liberals and the failure of democracy in the town. The rise of the BNP after this point, suggests that significant numbers of the electorate agreed. There certainly seems to have been a strong sense of frustration with the democratic process in Burnley. A study conducted in the town

in 2005, revealed that just 16 per cent of adults, 'feel they can influence decisions in their local area' (Burnley Borough Council, 2006:18).

The politicization of 'race' in Burnley

The growing sense of political disaffection that was evident in Burnley was paralleled, and intimately bound up with, the politicization of 'race' led by the town's Independent Group of candidates. In February 1995, a front page article appeared in the *Burnley Express* in which Harry Brooks, an Independent candidate and the ex-chairman of the Labour Group, alleged that the council had been allocating disproportionate funds to Asian community and voluntary groups for 'political reasons', in an attempt to attract votes. Brooks suggested that there existed a "wickedly incestuous" relationship between the council and local Asian community organisations⁴. This can be seen as the beginnings of a political campaign which would lead to the Independents, led by Brooks, becoming the main opposition party in the town by 2000. What is of particular interest is the way in which from this point onwards this idea of a bias in council funding became both a key vote winner and the predominant means by which the Labour council was attacked. Between 1995 and 2000, the Independents repeatedly criticised the local Labour administration for bowing to positive discrimination and favouring Daneshouse and Stoneyholme in the allocation of resources. Brooks consistently contrasted the funding going to Daneshouse and Stoneyholme, a predominantly 'Asian' area, with the degradation and disrepair of Burnley Wood, the mainly white ward for whom he was elected councillor in 1995. It is certainly the case that Brooks found a receptive audience for his particular brand of local politics. By the end of the 2000 local elections, the Independents had eleven councillors making it the second largest political grouping. In the elections that year the Independents defeated Labour in seven of the eight seats that both parties contested, as Labour lost seven seats on the council. When in 2001 Harry Brooks resigned as a councillor, precipitating the demise of the Independents as a political force in the town, a political vacuum was created into which the BNP

⁴ *Burnley Express*, February 24th 1995.

was able to step immediately, polling over 4,000 votes in that year's General Election.

Although the Independent Party must be seen as the key protagonist in the politicisation of 'race' in Burnley they were by no means alone. Both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives at various points between 1995 and 2001 also contributed to this rightward shift. In March 1995, in a letter to the *Burnley Express*, a Liberal Democrat councillor criticised Labour over the alleged disparity in funding granted to Asian community groups⁵. In 1996, the Liberals were criticised for giving false information regarding the funding of Asian voluntary organisations in their local election campaign literature⁶. Prior to the 1998 local elections, the Conservatives questioned the way in which monies were targeted to specific areas (i.e. 'Asian' areas) at the expense of other parts of town. In the spring of 2001 when the Liberal Democrats and Labour entered into an informal coalition a local Tory, Robert Frost, criticised both parties due to their commitment to "political correctness"⁷. Even more significantly, Steven Smith, the BNP parliamentary candidate in 2001, had actually stood as a Conservative candidate locally in 1999 (Smith, 2004:9). Although the Labour council was essentially the target of this rightward political shift, the actions of members of the party also played a part in this process. In December 1997, an inquiry was set up at the behest of local council leaders to investigate claims of racism within the body. It had been alleged by a number of junior housing officers that "some Labour councillors in Burnley had been pandering to racism by applying pressure on housing officers in order to make certain that ethnic minorities were not housed in their wards" (Copsey, 2005:192). In the subsequent enquiries two councillors were found guilty of breaching codes of conduct while a further two were exonerated⁸. The response to this issue highlights the extent of the disaffection felt towards the council in the town and

⁵ *Burnley Express*, March 17th 1995.

⁶ *Burnley Express*, May 2nd 1996.

⁷ *Burnley Express*, April 10th 2001.

⁸ *Burnley Express*, March 20th 1998.

contributed further to the politicisation of race. Rather than commending the council for its attempts to root out racism and malpractice, Labour's political opponents rounded on the leaders of the body. The Liberal Democrats and the Independents condemned the inquiry into the housing crisis, branding it a waste of money, while the Conservatives suggested that the councilors were simply acting in the best interests of local residents. Two of the councilors who left the Labour Group as a result of the inquiry were elected as Independents in the summer of 1998. This was a highly significant event as it established a direct link between Labour and the racist politics of the Independents. This growing feeling of disaffection with the Labour party, both locally and nationally, was closely linked to the perception that a new type of Labour was emerging that had little time for its traditional constituents. This appears to have heralded a change whereby in the eyes of a significant number of Labour supporters, those former councillors that had left the party were the 'true' representatives of the white residents of Burnley, representing their core constituents, as opposed to many of the remaining Labour councillors who had abandoned their plight in the name of political correctness.

If the intention of the Independents in politicising 'race' in the town was to fuel the burgeoning sense of disaffection towards the Labour council it certainly succeeded. However, another outcome of this rightward political shift was a growing sense of resentment visited upon the Asian population by many white residents within the town, which would eventually lead to the riots of 2001. From 1995 onwards community relations soured as a growing sense of competition emerged. In 2003, the year in which seven BNP councillors were elected, a local survey revealed that just 35 per cent of people felt that Burnley 'is a place where people from different backgrounds get on' (Burnley Borough Council, 2006:18). It seems that local conflicts over resources had helped to contribute to this situation. In the aftermath of the 2001 riots the Burnley Task Force criticised government policy, whereby resources were allocated to particular areas rather than being distributed to towns collectively on a thematic basis (Burnley Task

Force, 2001:54). The Report observed that in Burnley local councillors “see themselves primarily as lobbyists for ‘their’ wards, ‘their’ communities and ‘their’ service areas. This perpetuates the sense of competition between wards” (ibid: 59). The problem with this was that the high levels of segregation that exist in the town led to a situation where demands for funding were increasingly articulated in terms of ‘race’. The following quote from a BNP voter, a female in her fifties living on an affluent suburban estate, demonstrates both the perceived exclusivity of ‘Asian’ and ‘white’ areas, and the sense of marginalization felt by some white residents as a result of the allocation of resources;

“There’s a new gym opened...a gym and a swimming pool...all fantastic from the outside from what we can see, well to me its all very elegant, its cost a lot of money but its for Asians” (Rhodes, 2006:10).

During the weekend of 23rd June 2001 this simmering resentment erupted as whites and Asians clashed in a series of confrontations. Property was destroyed and businesses attacked, sparked by a hammer attack by a gang of whites on an Asian taxi driver. These events marked an important watershed in terms of both the political climate in Burnley and the relations between white and Asian communities. The riots, at least in terms of the actions of the white participants involved, must be read as the outcome, within a context of socio-economic deprivation, of a spiralling sense of resentment which can be traced back to 1995. It’s clear that the riots played an important part in the emergence of the BNP as a political force in the town. The events served to solidify the already apparent divisions, ensuring that ‘race’ remained at the forefront of the local political landscape. One white Burnley resident was quoted as stating that, “We weren’t racists before, but we are now” (Chrisafis, 2001). The national media in particular were keen to establish a link between the disturbances and the BNP. The local BNP rejected any involvement and instead interpreted the riots as being a result of the positive discrimination practiced by the council. It appears that many residents in Burnley agreed with this synopsis as between May 2001 and May 2002 the number of votes that the party received doubled.

In addition to local factors such as the Independents politicisation of the 'race' issue, the behaviour of the local media, the weakness of the Labour group, and the riots, the way in which the national context played a part in the spread of this sense of resentment must also be considered. From the late-1990s onwards the issue of asylum and immigration assumed a much greater significance, and since 2001 in particular New Labour adopted a much tougher stance on immigration, asylum, 'race' and citizenship (McGhee, 2005). The BNP has tended to emerge as a political force in areas with significant Muslim populations, at a time when a rampant Islamophobia has spread through Britain, particularly since the 2001 riots, and the September 11th terrorist attacks (John et al, 2006). These issues certainly seem to have played a role in the breakthrough of the BNP in Burnley. The issue of asylum has also been widely cited as a key factor in the emergence of the far right (Betz, 1994; Kitschelt, 1995; Renton, 2003; Copsey, 2004; Eatwell, 2004; John et al, 2006). There can be little doubt that these issues have been important in the rise of the BNP. All 16 of the BNP voters interviewed expressed their concern over the asylum issue. The ERS survey revealed that almost 9 out of 10 BNP voters cited the issues of immigration and asylum as an issue affecting their voting choice in 2003 (Deacon et al, 2004:13). As previously mentioned, this was the year in which the BNP made its most dramatic gains in the town. It appears that national debates on citizenship and entitlement resounded profoundly with BNP voters, who often equated the perceived misallocation of resources to 'Asian' areas, with the benefits which they suggested asylum-seekers benefited from on arrival in the UK. The fact that Burnley had an asylum-seeker population numbering less than 40 at this time did not appear to lessen the importance of this issue for BNP voters, rather local debates appeared to enjoy an increasing synergy with national anxieties.

The BNP in Burnley

A further factor to consider in explaining the political breakthrough of the BNP in Burnley has to focus on the actions of the party itself. While we have noted that

the changing political context had opened up a favourable political space for the BNP the party still had work to do in order to gain the support of such large numbers of the local electorate and to convince them of its 'legitimacy'. Under Nick Griffin the BNP has been able to achieve a greater degree of legitimacy by presenting a more 'moderate' face to the public (Copsey, 2004; Eatwell, 2004). This has been based upon establishing roots within local communities, by attaching onto local concerns, and by concealing the more esoteric aspects of party ideology such as holocaust denial and repatriation. This was certainly important in terms of the party achieving 'respectability' in Burnley, as interviewees often contrasted their own impressions of the party with prevailing national stereotypes. One BNP voter stated that, "I made a point of going onto the BNP website and I read through their manifesto and none of it's like it's portrayed on the television". Another supporter, a logistics manager, stated that,

"I think they were quite clever in the fact they distanced themselves from the NF skinhead type thing and just started speaking in a reasonable, rational political thing".

The actions of the Independents in Burnley not only opened up a political space but they also provided a blueprint on which the BNP could base its campaign. Copsey notes how Steven Smith, "ensured that his 'moderate' platform mirrored that of Brooks: he concentrated his attack on 'positive discrimination' and demanded that grant allocations should be targeted towards deprived neighbourhoods in Burnley's predominantly white districts" (2004:133). The slogan the party carried into the 2002 local elections, its breakthrough year, was 'Fighting for Fairer Funding'. The party also retained Brooks' anti-system populist approach. In the run up to the 2004 local elections, a BNP leaflet declared, "'Cleaners Wanted' to clean out Burnley Council. Hard work, no pay, and plenty of rubbish to clear!" adding 'Good riddance to Labour and Lib/Dem rubbish'. In an attempt to set political agendas in the same vein as Harry Brooks the party bombarded the letters page of the *Burnley Express* with a variety of complaints and comment. Smith reported that 80 per cent of the letters the party sent to the

local press had been published⁹, granting the BNP a platform for its views. In December 2001, the *Burnley Bravepages* website was launched which carried topical issues and rumour, and encouraged residents to send in any grievances that they had. By April 2002, the site was apparently getting 200 visits a day, with 2000 unique visitors accessing the site on the day of the 2002 local election¹⁰. By June 2003, the website had experienced 27,171 hits¹¹. The BNP has proved to be extremely responsive to emergent issues that carry a degree of political capital in the town, and party literature is tailored to the concerns of each ward. In 2004 the party called for a 20 mph speed limit to be enforced on a local housing estate. In June of the same year, it became involved in a campaign opposing the closure of a swimming baths there, and in attempts to set up local residents' group. The *Express* claimed that, "Local BNP councillors had been asked by the residents to do something to save the 100-year-old building"¹². This highlights the extent to which by focusing on local issues the party has been able to portray itself as seeking to represent the interests of the local white community.

The BNP was also so adept at attracting supporters as a result of the ingenuity and commitment of its local activists led by Steven Smith. The Burnley branch was formed as late as May 1999, and by Christmas 1999, 200 registered supporters had already been recruited (Smith, 2004:7-8). By the end of the local elections in 2002 this had increased to 1000 (ibid: 34). In addition to the website and the letters to the local paper the organisation used a wide range of innovative methods. Posters were placed in prominent places throughout the town and an A-Board van carrying party slogans became a regular sight on Burnley's roads (ibid:25). The party even hung a gigantic flag on a 75 ft high old mill chimney in the town centre encouraging people to 'Vote BNP'. For Smith all of these activities formed part of the 'legitimising' process (ibid: 7). The BNP was also able to raise its profile with a more traditional brand of community-based

⁹ *Spearhead*, July 2002, p.27.

¹⁰ *Identity*, May 2002, p.17.

¹¹ *Identity*, June 2003, p.13.

¹² *Burnley Express*, June 22nd 2004.

politics. The town was heavily leafleted and before the 2003 local elections, 35,000 leaflets were distributed (ibid:55). A database contained up to date information of supporters was constructed (ibid:8). Calling-cards were left in local pubs, and fans were targeted outside Turf Moor, the ground of Burnley Football Club (ibid: 6). There was clearly evidence of a great deal of homework as, aware of its likely constituents, the local branch trawled the *Yellow Pages* for the addresses of local self-employed tradesman (ibid: 53). This brand of localized politics has certainly enabled the BNP to achieve a highly visible presence in Burnley, allowing the party to reach a significant number of voters, and enhancing its claims to 'legitimacy'.

As well as attaching itself to local issues, the party also chose candidates that were very much rooted in the local community in an attempt to gain a greater degree of legitimacy. This has been reflected, to a large extent, in the nature of the local councillors put forward in Burnley and their claims to simply represent 'ordinary' folk. This has been central to the breakthrough of the party in the town. The BNP 2005 General Election literature carried the slogan, 'Local People Working for Local People'. In the run up to the 2001 General Election, a profile of the forthcoming parliamentary candidates which appeared in the *Express* declared that, "The love of his home town of Burnley is the driving force behind Steven Smith's desire to be MP for the borough", adding that, "he also raises money for the special care baby unit and various animal welfare charities"¹³. Many of the BNP candidates were seemingly well known within their communities. In fact, a quarter of the BNP voters interviewed professed to know personally the BNP councillors that they had supported. An elderly BNP voter living in one of the more affluent areas of the town stated that he had known the family of a BNP councillor "for many years and they're decent people". Candidates were used as a way of accruing legitimacy for the party. They became a means through which the tag of 'extremists' could be rejected. As the quote of one ex-BNP councillor demonstrates,

¹³ *Burnley Express*, May 25th 2001.

“I think in the area everybody knew me...they knew practically everything about me...so they knew I weren't Nazified, so they thought '[name of person] is not bad so they can't be so bad'. So you can see how they got *through* me to the outside” (Rhodes, 2006:15).

Once again the failure of the local Labour council to address the problems of racism in the town post-2001 riots contributed to the degree of legitimacy that the BNP has been seemingly able to achieve. Copsey has argued that, as before the riots, the response of the local Labour council to the emergence of the BNP was confused at best (2005:192). He suggests that the party saw that the best way to counter the appeal of the BNP was to ‘dispel the myths’ that were circulating the town regarding the allocation of resources. Unfortunately, as during the 1990s, and evidenced by the vast number of votes the BNP secured, this was initially relatively unsuccessful, and much of the local work in combating racism was carried out by the ANL (ibid: 192-3). Copsey argues that it was not until 2004, a year in which the share of the BNP vote failed to match the levels of support in 2003, that the party had formulated a more “cohesive” approach, with the local activists helping to distribute 40,000 leaflets produced by an anti-fascist organisation (ibid:196). Copsey perceptively suggests that it was the BNP’s selection of candidates that played a key factor in the weakness of the Labour response. He states that although, the Labour group heeded the advice of the national party and refused to work with the BNP, “behind the rhetoric, Caddy believed (along with other local Labour activists) that the BNP’s councillors were not really fascists at all but politically naïve Independents, ordinary Burnley folk who had been caught up in the tide of anti-Labour protest” (ibid: 193-4).

A ‘typical case’ of far right breakthrough’?

In many ways the emanation of the BNP as a political force seems to bear all the hallmarks of a ‘typical’ far right breakthrough. The various components from which schemas of far right breakthrough have been constructed are all present in the case of Burnley. The town has suffered dramatic labour market restructuring as a result of the collapse of the town’s manufacturing base and the shift towards

a postindustrial society. This has left the town exhibiting signs of high socio-economic deprivation. Secondly, a growing sense of political disaffection and alienation emerged in Burnley, something which has been widely associated with the breakthrough of the far right. However, both political disaffection and socio-economic deprivation are features which many of Britain's urban landscapes share. The question remains as to why support for the BNP has largely been concentrated within specific locales such as Burnley, Barking and Dagenham, and Stoke-on-Trent? Roger Eatwell has questioned the idea that there exists an instrumental relationship between socio-economic deprivation and far right support (Eatwell, 1998:19). In Burnley, it was the way in which both socio-economic deprivation and political dissatisfaction became articulated with recourse to 'race' which opened the ground for, first the Independents, and then the BNP to pursue racist political agendas. It seems problematic to suggest that such discontents inevitably lead to growth in far right support. It is also interesting to note that the support for the BNP has been located within the more affluent wards of the town, as well as poorer neighbourhoods. In fact, proportionally, the BNP has fared better in more affluent areas (see John et al, 2006). It is clear in Burnley that many other factors conspired to render 'race' as the underpinning of local political conflicts. One such factor is the clearly determinable racialised geography of Burnley. Approximately two-thirds of the town's Asian population, which represents 7.2 per cent of Burnley as a whole, is located within one electoral ward. Just two other of the town's fifteen wards, comprise 'Asian' populations exceeding 5 per cent, and both areas neighbour Daneshouse and Stoneyholme. As alluded to above, this has enabled a territorial demarcation in which for BNP voters, the location of certain public facilities in the 'Asian' area of town was seen, not only to benefit that community alone, but to exclude 'white' residents from using them.

The level of 'legitimacy' and respectability that the BNP was able to attain in Burnley is also an integral reason for its breakthrough. It was clear from the interviews with BNP voters that by focusing on local concerns and carefully

selecting candidates who were popular local figures, the party was able to make political headway. This support base was cultivated via an intensive form of campaigning, led by a committed number of local activists, who were attentive to local grievances and who used innovative and visual methods to attract voters. However, much of the groundwork in terms of promoting a racist political agenda had been done by the Independents. With the aid of the local media, the Independents had popularized the notion of positive discrimination and anchored it within the local consciousness as the principle means through which the local Labour council were criticized. When the Independents imploded following their 2000 local election success, the BNP was in primary position to assume ownership of such sentiments, benefiting from the weakness of both the Liberal Democrats and the Conservatives. As the Labour Group stated in its submission to the report into the 2001 riots, “the Independents made the bullets for the BNP to fire” (Burnley Task Force: appendix 2c). In short, the complexity of factors involved in the emergence of the BNP in Burnley renders any notion of a ‘typical’ far right breakthrough problematic.

References

Betz, H-G. (1994) *Radical Right-Wing Populism in Western Europe*, New York: St. Martin’s Press.

Brooks, H. (2002) *A Town Betrayed: Burnley in the Ten Years to the Riots*, Burnley: Self-published.

Burnley Snapshot (2005) *Burnley Snapshot 2005: Facts and Figures-at a glance*, Burnley: Burnley Borough Council.

Burnley Borough Council (2006) *Burnley 2006: The Real Story*, Burnley: Burnley Borough Council.

Burnley Task Force Report (2001) *Burnley Speaks, Who Listens?* Burnley: Task Force.

Chrisafis, A. (2001) ‘Years of harmony wrecked in days’, *The Guardian*, June 25th 2001.

Copsey, N. (2004) *Contemporary British Fascism: The British National Party and the Quest For Legitimacy*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Copsey, N. (2005) 'Meeting the Challenge of Contemporary British Fascism? The Labour Party's Response to the National Front and the British National Party', in Copsey and Renton, D. (eds.) *British Fascism, the Labour Movement and the State*, Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Deacon, G., Keita, A., and Ritchie, K. (2004) *Burnley and the BNP and the case for electoral reform*, London: Electoral Reform Society.

Eatwell, R. (1998) 'The Dynamics of Right-Wing Electoral Breakthrough', *Patterns of Prejudice*, 32(3): 3-31.

Eatwell, R. (2004) 'The extreme right in Britain: The long road to 'modernization'', in Eatwell and Mudde, C. (eds.) *Western Democracies and the New Extreme Right Challenge*, London: Routledge.

Harris, P. and Wazir, B. (2002) 'Bitter North braced for another summer of hate', *The Observer*, May 5th 2002.

John, P., Margetts, H., Rowland, D., & Weir, S. (2006) *The BNP: the roots of its appeal*, University of Essex: Democratic Audit, Human Rights Centre.

Kitschelt, H. (1995) *The Radical Right in Western Europe: A Comparative Analysis*, University of Michigan Press.

McGhee, D. (2005) *Intolerant Britain? Hate, Citizenship and Difference*, Berkshire: Open Univ. Press.

ODPM (2004) *The English Indices of Deprivation 2004*, ODPM: NRU.

Renton, D. (2003) 'Examining the Success of the British National Party, 1999-2003', *Race and Class*, 45(2): 75-85.

Rhodes, J. (2006) 'The Local Politics of the BNP', *Sage Race Relations Abstracts*, 31(4): 5-20.

Smith, S. (2004) *How It Was Done: The rise of Burnley BNP: the inside story*, Burnley: Cliviger Press.