

Far right alarmism

by Catherine Fieschi

Ukip and Veritas are not very pretty, but must not be lumped together with the BNP

Catherine Fieschi is director of the Centre for the Study of European Governance at Nottingham University

As the election campaign gets under way, the extent of the potential support emerging for parties to the right of the Tories could become an important theme in some parts of the country. Despite the huge obstacle of Britain's first past the post system, is it possible that a combination of BNP and Ukip voters could affect results in a significant number of seats and between them achieve a level of support approaching that of the French National Front--20 per cent plus of the total popular vote?

The cover of the *New Statesman* on 23rd January screamed: "One in five Britons could vote for the far right," and the accompanying analysis suggested that some sort of breakthrough was possible. But this is mainly nonsense, depending as it does on an unjustified conflation of the two parties.

Finding a set of lowest common denominator similarities between the BNP and Ukip (and newborn Veritas) is not hard: they are anti-European, non-mainstream parties, their voters are closer to the Tory party than to Labour or the Lib Dems, and they are xenophobic and nationalist.

But the BNP is a far-right, extremist party. Its roots are to be found in white supremacist ideals; its aspiration, among others, is a white, hierarchically ordered Britain. For public consumption, the BNP sometimes adopts a populist, common-sense rhetoric that allows it to convince some non-extremists. But read a BNP manifesto, flick through the *Voice of Freedom* newspaper, visit its website and the populism soon gives way to a relentlessly aggressive tone in which racism dominates to the exclusion of almost everything else. It may not be fully fledged fascism, but it is not far from it: metaphors of corruption and decay, an obsession with the nation's invaded, dying body and the call to eradicate the twin plagues of immigration and racial mixing are signs of a fascist mind. Add to this a barely veiled acceptance of violence, and disdain for ordinary voters, and you have a combination which has, in the past, served as a base for fascist ideologies. The BNP could be a very frightening party--if it was more organised, if it averaged more than 5 per cent of the vote, if it was not broke, if its leader was not out on bail and if many of its councillors did not end up in jail for GBH. The truth is that its position is precarious and its prospects are dismal.

Ukip presents a very different profile and, regardless of the turmoil in which it finds itself as a result of the defection of Robert Kilroy-Silk, offers slightly different prospects. While it may be entirely accurate to label Ukip nationalist (and even xenophobic), it bears little resemblance to the BNP. As a nationalist, anti-European, populist party, Ukip resembles other European nationalist populist parties such as the French *Mouvement pour la France* or the Italian Northern League, which huddle together in two vocal and ineffectual groupings in the European parliament. What Ukip fears is not the mixing of races or the dilution of the white gene pool, but the emergence of a complex, transnational authority that seems to challenge the values of a stable 1950s Britain that never was. What it hates is not the immigrant per se, but a bureaucratised and

technocratic politics that seems to remove national control over our collective destiny. What it advocates is the return to the manageable and less bewildering politics of a sovereign nation state run by local notables--tradesmen, councillors, teachers, successful shopkeepers and the WI, all of whom share a vision of Britain: it is not necessarily white, it is just English. We may find this petty, small-minded and reactionary with its conspiracy theories, nostalgia and the wisdom of second-hand car salesmen, but it is not extremist. As for Veritas, it may attempt to position itself more broadly, to endorse a vision of England threatened as much by internal enemies like the professional political class as by the Brussels bureaucrats. But these are mere variations on a theme.

While Ukip and Veritas may harbour some supporters who are profoundly racist, the party's platform is of the populist right much closer to the French Poujadists of the 1950s (bent on thwarting the development of large supermarkets and an invasive tax system) or even of Italy's Northern League (also disgusted with the political technocracy and the double-talk of the elite) than to the hard right of Le Pen or Haider--or the BNP.

National populism and racism are not the same thing. The former may give rise to the latter, but nationalist and populist attitudes sometimes remain just that--nationalist and populist. Ukip's xenophobia is the result of a conservative nationalism and profound anti-cosmopolitanism that extends first and foremost to Europe (its values, its institutions and its politicians). The BNP is a racist party whose overriding concern is the racial make-up of the nation.

To treat these two parties as the same, as the New Statesman article did, allows the BNP to appear more successful than it is. But it was Ukip rather than the BNP which performed well in European elections. The NS headline suggested that a substantial proportion of the population might seriously contemplate voting for the BNP. But for voters, the term "far right" does not include Ukip. It refers strictly to the BNP.

This "one in five Britons" alarmism has been reinforced by the most recent British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey. It found that whereas in 1995, two thirds of respondents thought that immigration should be reduced "a lot," in 2003 this figure jumped to 74 per cent.

But these figures must be set in their proper context. Yes, there has been a rise in anti-immigration attitudes since the late 1990s, after a decade and a half or so during which the issue registered less strongly. Yet if we go back further, the 1995 to 2003 period is not so extraordinary. The data from Gallup, for example, reveals that there were plenty of times in the 1960s and 1970s when concern about immigration rose markedly. In June 1968, 27 per cent of respondents thought that immigration was the most important issue facing Britain. These are similar levels to today, where, for supporters of mainstream parties, that figure hovers below 25 per cent. Attitudes towards this issue are in constant flux and it is premature to detect a long-term trend based on data for less than a decade. We should also acknowledge that changed attitudes are partly a response to changed circumstances: a significant increase in net immigration in recent years and a consequent increase in reporting on immigration.

One of the most important findings of the BSA, yet one of the least publicised, is that the increase in anti-immigration attitudes does not seem to be linked to an increase in racial prejudice (both self-reported and perceived), and that it is not linked to an increase in national pride or an increased conservatism towards the components of Britishness.

Moreover, attitudes have "hardened" regardless of party affiliation and even among graduates. This suggests that concern with the management of immigration--its impact on public services and so on--has for many people been decoupled from racism. If that is the case, then the BNP is likely to benefit less than Ukip and Veritas.

Even when the racists have been separated from the anti-immigration lobby, many find the latter's stance profoundly disturbing. But we had better get used to it. The pressure is growing--often from the left--to break up the somnolent two-party system in favour of one in which minority views count for more. Proportional representation of various kinds is one reason why both Poujadist and far-right parties are far stronger in Europe--and why the main centre-left party no longer automatically captures a majority of the working-class vote in several countries, including France, Belgium, Italy and the Netherlands.

The paradox here is that it is virulently anti-European parties that may offer the final proof of the Europeanisation of British politics.

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