The BNP in local government: Just how different is it?

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Abstract

The English County elections in June 2009 saw the British National Party (BNP) secure three (its first) shire level seats; thus providing the party with 58 councillors across 27 councils in England. Though the penetration of the party varies across councils, a number now see it exerting some relevance: in one instance even forming the official opposition. Indeed, the party appears to be successfully consolidating its fortunes: its leader Nick Griffin will contest the parliamentary seat in its strong hold of Dagenham in the forthcoming General Election. This paper discusses the BNP’s presence and conduct in local government and presents findings from an ongoing Leverhulme-funded investigation into the impact of small parties in British Local Government. The paper considers BNP councillors in their operational context and examines them from the perspectives of role; council activities; representative capacity; and, relationship with their party. In contrast to common assumptions, preliminary findings suggest that BNP councillors exhibit many characteristics similar to those from other parties. Yet, the party’s unique characteristics do create specific tensions that ensure its councillors and local party groups also remain very different to their more mainstream counterparts.
The BNP in local government: Just how different is it? 1

_Karin Bottom and Colin Copus_

**Introduction**

To date, the British National Party (BNP) has failed to secure parliamentary representation at Westminster, yet it has – with varying intensity – been a presence in local government for more than a decade. At the county council elections in June 2009 the party fielded 465 candidates (enough to secure a party political broadcast for the local elections alone) while 69 candidates fought the accompanying European Elections (BBC News, 11 May 2009). Three BNP county councillors were elected to three separate county councils: Lancashire, Leicestershire and Hertfordshire - the first time the party has held any county seats. The party also won (for the first time) two seats in the European Parliament, one for the Yorkshire and Humber region (Andrew Brons); the other, for the North West where the party leader, Nick Griffin, was elected; and, at the time of writing, it holds one seat on the London Assembly as well as 56 council seats across 27 councils. On some councils, numerically at least, the BNP now makes up a substantial opposition bloc of councillors, such as in Barking and Dagenham Borough Council where it is the main opposition party. Furthermore, Nick Griffin the party’s leader will contest the newly re-drawn constituency seat in Dagenham at the forthcoming General Election. Though not expected to win, psephologists predict that his expected vote share will be
taken from Labour and by virtue of this, the Conservative Party may benefit to the extent that its MP will be successfully take this long-term Labour seat (Hill, 2010).

Born out of the National Front, the BNP has long been considered a far right, anti-system force with fascist tendencies (Copsey 2004; Eatwell 2004; Carter 2005). The party is radically xenophobic, adheres to classical racism and rejects the democratic status quo (Clarke, Bottom and Copus, 2008: 514). The party takes a hard stance on immigration, linking it to crime, poverty, violence and social decay while rejecting multiculturalism and favouring the deportation of asylum seekers. It promotes the welfare of indigenous white people above all others and claims the former’s rights are being stripped by promotion of the latter’s. The BNP glorifies – re-writing when necessary – Britain’s past; it is unashamedly nationalist, rejecting globalization but supporting protectionism. Despite hostility to trade unions and ‘communists’ (Renton, 2005: 31), its economic and welfare policies are clearly informed by the ‘left wing economics (Clarke, Bottom and Copus, 2008: 514).

In order to widen its appeal, the party has assumed a strong populist style in recent years. Clearly positioning itself against the collective – and corrupt – political class and on the side of the voters: by virtue of this it has been able to package itself as an alternative to all other party options. In terms of classic populism (see Taggart, 2000, 2, see also: 116; 102-3; 117), the BNP uses ethnicity and nationalism to identify what it considers to be its ‘natural constituency’ or ‘heartland’. It is interventionalist, favouring a strong state; leadership dominated; and, the party relies on its ability to perpetuate a continuous sense
of ‘crisis’ that only it is equipped to successfully address (Clarke, Bottom and Copus, 2008: 514). Consequently, it lacks core values – as we would identify them in other parties – and thus exhibits a chameleon-like quality that enables it to adopt and concentrate on fashionable, mobilizing issues of the time (Clarke, Bottom and Copus, 2008: 526). Finally, the party exhibits a strong tendency to engage in ‘irresponsible outbidding’ (Sartori, 2005 [1976], 122-24) and much of what it promises is unrealistic: similar to the majority of extreme populist parties, the BNP makes promises that all evidence suggests it would be unable to keep (Clarke, Bottom and Copus, 2008: 526-527).

Despite undergoing a change of image in order to increase its catch-all potential and thus electability – similar in many respects to Labour under Tony Blair and the Conservatives under David Cameron – questions remain as to whether the BNP’s modernization has been genuine or whether it continues to be an anti-system far-right party with goals and ideology that are incompatible with a liberal-democratic political system. Indeed, it must be asked, have the party’s elected members used their democratic mandate to conduct council business in the same way as other parties, or are they simply using their representation to develop the image of the party as respectable, while generally acting in ways that would be unacceptable for a councillor? Though it must be noted that all parties have councillors that have displayed unacceptable behaviour, as cases before the Standards Board indicate, we examine this issue in relation to BNP councillors, and using a selection of results from recent and on-going research, ask how the party has impacted upon politics at a local level? This paper explores the party’s organization within councils
and how its councillors conduct council business and how they perceive their role as councillor and how they carry it out. It asks the controversial question of whether these councillors are intrinsically different to their colleagues, or, in contrast, whether they are similar on any or all levels? It then proceeds to examine how other parties have responded to the arrival of BNP councillors, finally presenting some findings that suggest BNP councillors do indeed display a number of features that can also be found in their more mainstream counterparts. First however, the paper sets out the current position of the party in local government.

The BNP and local government

The BNP won its first council seat in 1993 when Derek Beackon took the Milwall ward of Tower Hamlets council. Since then, its fortunes have been mixed and inconsistent (Eatwell 2004; Copsey 2004). Despite strong and highly visible reactions to BNP successes in local government, the party is far from making a breakthrough in terms of council seats. Nevertheless, it has managed to steadily, if slowly, raise its local profile, fielding over 600 candidates in the May 2008 local elections, nearly a threefold increase on 1997. These elections saw it gain 13 seats and extend its presence into eight more councils. However, none of the results were particularly substantial with the party securing three seats on one council, and two or less on the others. Though fewer councillors stood in the 2009 elections, the party further consolidated its presence, taking three county seats and securing sizable vote shares in a number of areas. Table 1 shows the current BNP seats on principal councils. Its presence is in the main – though not exclusively – urban and the majority of seats are on district councils where it is argued, a
significant factor in the party’s success has been its ability to embed itself within local communities articulating a relatively banal form of politics that becomes legitimized in that particularly locality (Rhodes, 2009). In most cases the party holds only one or two seats and on only four councils does the party hold four or more seats: Barking and Dagenham where the party hold 12 seats and operates as the official opposition (Labour hold 37 seats; the Conservatives two), Stoke on Trent, eight seats; Burnley four seats; and, Epping Forest four seats.

[Insert Table 1 near here]

Compared to other small parties in local government, the BNP is a minor force in most respects. Outside the big three parties, small parties, independents and political associations hold approximately 1,370 seats (7.5 per cent) in England and of those the BNP are responsible for just over 4.2 per cent. Numerically, the party is indeed a minor one. The majority of non-mainstream seats are held by independent councillors and the BNP does not, in many respects, tell the most important local story: the success of groups such as ‘Independent Health Concern’ in Kidderminster (IHC) and the ‘Boston Bypass Independents’ (BBI) are significantly more dramatic – though geographically concentrated – while the Green Party currently sits on almost double the councils that the BNP does with 126 councillors, also enjoying representation on a number of principal
Welsh councils, as opposed to the smaller community ones that the BNP sits on. The Green Party also holds two seats in the London Assembly, whereas the BNP holds one.

Other non-mainstream parties invite far less attention than the BNP. The excessive level of interest can be explained in the party’s ability – much like the rest of the far-right party family – to exert what Herzog (1987) refers to as a ‘mobilization potential’ in that its power to affect the political agenda and influence debate is disproportionate to its size. In this sense it acts as a local opinion-former; its relevance being in its ability to attract attention and shape the direction of competition. In keeping with classic small party theory, the BNP brings new issues to the public, acting as a ‘trial balloon’ for the mainstream (see Fisher 1980: 611-2), often forcing it to respond to issues that would otherwise be considered too controversial to address. In every sense the BNP galvanizes popular discontent with the ruling political elite in such a way that it cannot be ignored (see Copus, Clark and Bottom, 2008).

Media reporting has perpetuated this negative picture at a local level, stating that the majority of BNP local councillors can neither organize nor cohere while they behave in a manner inconsistent with the responsibilities of office. Yet disreputable behaviour is not solely the domain of the BNP; as the complaints and investigations undertaken by the Standards Board show. Councillors from all parties can behave in a less than ethical fashion; yet, concerns regarding the BNP remain, run deep and eclipse those that may arise about councillors from other parties. Unlike other organizations, the core of the BNP, the very ideology upon which it is based, provokes questions that just do not apply
to others because the party exists outside of the liberal political orthodoxy and thus must be subjected to extensive investigation and questioning. Unacceptable behaviour is the expected norm for the BNP and consequently we are not surprised when it takes place, rather it serves to vindicate received wisdom. In contrast, inappropriate behaviour by councillors from other parties is considered pathological and appears to be interpreted as an aberration because the party concerned reflects core democratic values and is supportive of a democratic pluralistic system.

In sum, the BNP is judged by different standards to other parties because the party’s origins invite – even demand – scepticism. What can often been seen as an over-reaction to BNP successes, feeds into the rhetoric employed and the positioning developed by the BNP as the champion of the excluded underdog and itself a victim (as the recent BBC Question Time emphasized). Indeed, other candidates leaving the platform when victorious BNP candidates are speaking and the reaction by anti-fascist organizations to its European success, has publically highlighted the ‘exceptionalism’ with which the BNP is treated and also served to paint the party as a victim. As a Unite Against Fascism (UAF) demonstrator was reported as saying at Nick Griffin’s attempt to hold a press conference outside of Parliament: ‘I believe in free speech, but not for fascists’ (Sunday Telegraph, 7 June 2009)!

Here we examine the BNP through a less exceptionalist lens, investigating it as we would any other party to provide a picture of the party’s councillors and how they behave in
office. What we do here is examine the work of BNP councillors and compare them to other parties in order to present a picture of the BNP in local government.

The overwhelming majority of councillors across Britain come from one of the three main parties – almost 92 per cent of councillors in England are Conservative, Labour or Liberal Democrat, the remainder, often – and unhelpfully – termed as ‘others’ comprising the local branches of small but nationally-based parties, various types of local organizations and independent politicians (Copus, Clark and Bottom, 2008). The nature of their role and their responsibilities force councillors to determine a division of loyalty between those that they represent, and the party – or organization – of which they are a member (Copus, 2004: 14); the nature of the tension being very much dependent upon the organization to which the councillor belongs. Similarly, this feature also informs a councillor’s representative role and members vary in terms of their perceived representative responsibilities (Newton, 1976), levels of activity (Gyford, Leach and Game, 1989), contact with the local bureaucracy (Corina, 1974), community emphasis (Copus, 2004), attitudes towards the importance of party (Copus, 2004) as well as campaigning techniques (Copus, 2007). Indeed, different councillor types are identifiable.

Councillor role analysis

Councillor role analysis has concentrated on two aspects of the representational relationship: policy and constituents to explain the relationship councillors have with either. Eulau, Whalke, Buchanan and Ferguson (1959) distinguished between
representative style and focus; the former referred to the criterion of judgement used by the representative and the latter to the body or group to which the representative gave preference. They drew attention to how representatives act as *free-agents*, or trustees of the electorate’s interests; *delegates*, who place the wishes of the voter at the centre of their political attention and in some cases may even act as though bound by those views; and, *politicos*, who act as a trustee where possible or a delegate when required.

Rao (1998) indicates that distinguishing between various aspects of representation enable us to tell whether the councillor functions more as a delegate (constituents’ interests preside) or a trustee (party’s interests preside). Yet, as noted by Jones (1975), such distinctions are difficult to disentangle as the councillor may also act as a representative of a broad section of the community, a particular organized group, another local authority or individual citizens.

Newton (1976: 122-124) placed councillors into five role types: the *parochial*, who focuses on his or her ward and individuals within it; the *people’s agent*, who also focuses on the problems of individual constituents, but, has a broader, city-wide perspective; *policy advocates* who express a preference for broad policy issues and governing the council; *policy brokers* also focus on the council as a whole, but act as mediators in the policy process; and, *policy spokesmen*, who see themselves as speaking on behalf of the electorate on general policy issues. Gyford (1976: 133-141) saw councillors as a ‘tribune’ of the people, focused on individual or ward casework; or as statesmen, focused on broader policy and party concerns. Copus (2004) also draws our attention to the pastoral
role of the councillor which involves focusing on the collective needs of a ward and citizens within it.

Heclo (1969) saw the councillor as a *committee member*, specializing in the business of the council, a *constituency representative* focusing on local concerns, or a *party activist* who approaches council work with the interests of the party at the forefront. Corina (1974) developed a five-way typology to explain the nature of the councillor’s relationship with his or her party. The *party politician, ideologist, partyist, associate* and *politico-administrator*, each of whom varied in the connection and closeness they have with the party and in how they interpret its role and purpose within the conduct of council affairs. Simply put, some councillors are more inclined to place party and ideology above all else, whilst others see the party as assisting them in some aspect of council work.

Councillor role analysis enables us to explore councillor activities in specific settings and in relation to players within local democracy: the council as a politically representative institution; the community and individuals represented; and, the party. This paper now explores whether what we already know about councillor focus and role enables us to understand BNP councillors in the same way as it does other councillors – thus challenging ‘exceptionalist’ interpretations of the BNP in council. It examines whether the existence of BNP councillors fundamentally alters councillor role analysis and to do this we examine BNP councillors’ activities in council, their relationship with the communities they represent and the way they act as a party within council. Finally, the paper draws conclusions about whether or not BNP councillors represent a threat to
established democratic practices and local representative democracy, or whether that threat is more crudely and simply to the seats held by other parties.

**BNP in council**

Meetings of the full council, or overview and scrutiny and regulatory committees, represent the formal, open, public theatres of representation. They are the places where councillors can articulate their views, express party positions; give voice to the opinions expressed within the communities they represent, explore policies and decisions of the local political leadership, hold to account and challenge the council bureaucracy over public services; and deliberate local, and national political concerns – all this of course, for those councillors elected as a candidate of a political party, will be done through the filter of party ideologies and party interest and advantage.

The image presented may be a somewhat romanticized version of council meetings, which have been challenged on countless occasions for being too formal and routine and dominated by agendas and the needs of running a large bureaucratic machine, rather than providing a chamber for political discourse. Furthermore, the party group and the meetings of the majority party group have long replaced council as the place where debate and deliberation takes place and policy and decisions are formulated to be ratified in formal council settings (Copus, 2001; 1999 (a) (b)). Yet, these settings provide an opportunity to examine the conduct of local politics and to examine party behaviour.
Despite much commentary to the contrary, when it comes to council meetings the attendance of BNP councillors does not appear to be overly different to those from other parties, especially given their comparatively small numbers. Indeed, part of the ‘bad councillor mythology’ that has been developed around the BNP is that they do not attend council meetings. Over the municipal year May 2008-2009, BNP councillors in England attended the majority of full council meetings for which they were eligible; 23 of the 56 councillors displaying 100 per cent attendance, the lowest recorded attendance being 36 per cent and average attendance 84 per cent. Indeed, attendance figures in the four councils that see the BNP with relatively significant and thus more comparable representation – Burnley, Barking and Dagenham, Epping Forest and Stoke on Trent – again demonstrates that councillor attendance is not particularly different to the accepted average of those from other parties. Table 2 displays the data rounded up to the nearest full attendance number and percentage.

[Insert Table 2 near here]

Such attendance figures go some way in dispelling perceptions of BNP poor attendance at council. Indeed, it could be argued that they are deploying their resources well in this regard. When considering the small size of most BNP groups – 12 being the largest – any absence, for whatever reason, has a greater impact on the presence of that group in a meeting than for a larger group and particularly so in committee where the group may have only one or two members. Generally speaking the notion that BNP councillors ‘don’t attend’ is somewhat over exaggerated: while some exhibit lower levels of
attendance, the majority simply do not, and, being engaged in council work, BNP councillors begin to display the same role orientations as other councillors. Within BNP groups – keeping in mind that most are less than four members – a share of policy-focused councillors is also evident. This demonstrates a wish to influence policy development and in some cases spokes–people have emerged for particular policy causes. Indeed, reference to council minutes evidence this, furthermore, party groups appear – in most instances – to vote cohesively and vote with other party groups in order to pass motions or legislation. In an interview, one BNP group leader expressed confidence that the party would control the council after the next elections and emphasized that the BNP group were ‘learning as many of the ropes’ as possible for when they took power. Indeed, the group’s members needed to be expert in policy work, as intense political opposition was expected, as was obstruction from council officers and problems with the law, if the group took control.

Attendance at council meetings rests on opportunities to attend and that depends on allocation of members to various overview and scrutiny and regulatory committees. Of the 56 BNP councillors elected before 4 June 2009, 49 sit on committees; eight have not been allocated any committees; three sit on over ten and average committee membership is three. The smaller the group, the greater the strain on resources in terms of committee membership and full council attendance. When it comes to committee membership and attendance the BNP seems no different from other small council groups: they experience resource problems; the committees on which they serve are the gift of the ruling group; a small number of members may have to cover a wide range of responsibilities and
attendance demands; and, the group may – like any group – have members who did not expect to win, or stood after being promised that they would be a paper candidate only and had no chance of winning; in other words reluctant councillors.

Only two councils see BNP councillors with chairing or vice-chairing responsibilities, four on Stoke-on-Trent and one on Epping Forest. Yet, not a single BNP councillor on Barking and Dagenham – where the BNP holds the largest number of the party’s seats and form the official opposition group – holds a chair or vice-chair. Labour on Barking and Dagenham have a majority of two over the BNP and the two Conservatives; Stoke-on-Trent is a hung council where 60 councillors divide into nine groups – with no single group having an overall majority; Epping Forest, has five groups, plus a lone Labour councillor and an overall Conservative majority of eight seats. So, we see a majority Labour council denying opposition groups committees chairs or vice-chairs; a hung council allocating chairs and vice-chairs amongst all groups; and, a council with a majority party but a number of other groups, granting those other groups vice-chairs. In any circumstances all these scenarios would be unremarkable and in many respects distribution of such positions is specified by council culture and council rules. Indeed, a recent interview with the local party ‘Independent Community and Health Concern’ (ICHC) confirms this. Though ICHC sits as the official opposition with almost 24 per cent of seats on Wyre Forest District Council, the ruling Conservative group continues to deny it any full chairing responsibilities (Bottom and Crow, 2008). Consequently we have to presume that the inclusion and exclusion of the BNP – as described above – is, in many respects, unremarkable.
Part I of the Local Government Act, 2000 introduced an ethical framework and a rigorous code of conduct within which councillors operate. Councillor conduct is monitored by a standards committee which each council is required to form; all were to be policed by the ‘Standards Board’ (now ‘Standards for England’) which had the power to investigate complaints against councillors and impose sanctions, including removal from office. In research projects conducted by the authors, councillors have often complained that referrals made by fellow councillors and by officers are often used as a tactic for silencing or intimidating opponents, where little real ground for complaint exists. While the officers of the ‘Standards for England’ are practiced in weeding out frivolous and vexatious complaints, the process as a complaint moves through the system to rejection is an unsettling time for a councillor. However, the accession of BNP to elected council has heightened concerns relating to the maintenance of standards. Dr Robert Chilton, the Chair of ‘Standards for England’ has stated that local authorities believe that the BNP’s lack of established discipline, its proclivity to pursue a narrow agenda as opposed to wider council duties and its tendency to instigate adversarial politics in chamber that can lead to insult throwing collectively ‘undermine public confidence in local democracy’ and pose a potential risk to standards in local government (cited in Drillsma-Milgram, 2009: 2). Moreover, one Chief Executive for a council where the party has representation has stated that its councillors are keen to ‘push the standards regime to the limit’ and do not mind being censured by it (cited in Drillsma-Milgram, 2009: 1). Reference to council minutes does indeed concur with this view. Though some members are recorded as speaking neutrally on topics, examples of inflammatory rhetoric and ensuing heated
debate can easily be found. Unfortunately ‘Standards for England’ does not provide information on complaints against any councillor or those that are carried through to outcome over any given period. Consequently it is not possible – through this route – to ascertain an accurate picture of BNP behaviour in comparison to their colleagues. However, the following quotation illustrates the attitude most mainstream councillors seem to hold towards their BNP colleagues:

It sickens me we have to work with them; ... I’d keep them off everything; but, we’ve made it as hard as possible for them to ask questions or use scrutiny. I’m sick of looking at them smug, nasty faces (Labour councillor).

Responses from other councillors to the election of BNP exists on a continuum that runs from verbally violent denunciations of the BNP, including personal attacks on their calibre, honesty, integrity, intelligence and in some cases even odour and personal hygiene; to a reluctant resignation of working with BNP councillors driven by the realities of council work and composition. The dynamics and interactions of council politics are often related to the council’s political composition and the respective size of the council groups (Copus, 2004). In a fractured council, particularly where no group has a majority, it is far less easy for groups to be choosey about with whom they work; where, in contrast, a party has a sizeable majority, opposition can be marginalized and ignored.
The reaction from main party councillors interviewed were in many respects predictable – they do not like BNP councillors and take it as an affront to decency and dignity that they are required to work with them. For example, it was stated in interview:

_They’ve been elected [BNP councillors], yes, but only because many voters just don’t understand what they are all about; they’re a hateful and despicable lot and it is wrong to have to work with them, but that is what we have to do_ (Conservative councillor)

Beyond that however, deeper concerns were expressed regarding the reasons for BNP council election success and a palpable fear that portions of the electorate – beyond those that had voted BNP – were rejecting the broad liberal, multicultural, diversity agenda shared by the main parties; in other words, voters were rejecting the political orthodoxy. Moreover, there was a growing awareness that the BNP was beginning to find support amongst, primarily though not exclusively, the white-working class simply because the needs of this group had been downplayed or ignored.¹⁰

Interviews often threw-up the use of terms like ‘perceived problems of immigration’ or, ‘they think’ ‘the facts show they are wrong’ (‘they’ being the white-working class) and the ‘facts’ being about resource allocation. Whereas, the problems experienced by minority communities were expressed in more genuine terms, not prefixed by the word ‘perceived’ and certainly never involving the word ‘they’. Such comments open up a wider debate leading us away from the council chamber to the broader question of the BNP councillor as a local representative.
While in some respects unsurprising, some mainstream attitudes towards BNP colleagues were concerning by virtue of their likelihood to prevent BNP councillors’ from successfully performing their duties. For example:

*We [the ruling group] have done all we can to make sure they [BNP councillors] are kept away from as much as possible; we don’t speak to them; have nothing to do with them; and, if we could get them off the council we would. We’ve put every block in their way* (Labour councillor)

In one interview with a BNP councillor described a situation regarding a female BNP colleague:

*she doesn’t come to meetings much because of the bullying she’s received from the other lot (other groups); they behave like animals* (BNP councillor)

These comments – controversially – suggest that it is not just the BNP which is obstructing local government process, the mainstream is too. If representative of a critical mass within the councillor population, an inherent tension that mitigates against efficient council functioning is associated with BNP presence: if this is the case, then its existence has far-reaching implications for the functioning of local government. Moreover such tensions indicate that the challenges surrounding the BNP in local government are somewhat more diverse and complicated than we are often given to believe.
BNP councillors as elected representatives

Taking Eulau Whalke, Buchanan and Ferguson’s (1959) notion of representative style and focus as a starting point, along with what is known about councillor role orientations, we can start to examine the nature of BNP councillors as elected representatives and ask how they approach the notion of representation. All councillors experience a tension between the demands of governing a council area and the promotion and defence of the interests of the wards from which they were elected, particularly when such interests may clash (Copus 1999(a) and (b); 2004). In other words, when the ‘general good’ as defined by a council leads to a ‘specific bad’ for some, the councillor must choose to govern or represent. Moreover, in the allocation of scarce resources and policy development, councillors must decide on winners and losers and thus will promote what they consider to be their main focus of concern.

The representative style and focus of BNP councillors have been criticized by other parties in the research, and more generally. The key concerns here relate to party’s attitudes towards those they represent. That councillors tend to feel an affiliation for certain sections of their electorate, indeed may even be, or consider themselves to be, part of a specific group (Maud 1967; Jones, 1975) has not, in the main, provoked any real anxiety in the past: councillors are expected to behave responsibly, acknowledge overall responsibility for the whole community and represent the broad interests of their wards or divisions. While councillors may choose to concentrate on policy, monitoring roles,
representative responsibilities, community leadership or indeed the party (Snape and Dobbs 2003: 51), it is taken that one group of society will not be excessively valued or devalued over others, certainly not to the point of overt neglect. However, given the BNP’s perceived racist and anti-immigrant policies, as well as the irresponsible, violent, polemic and populist politics with which it is associated, it is frequently argued that the party’s councillors are unable and unwilling to adequately serve all voters.

The BNP and ‘representation’ was examined in an exchange between Nick Griffin and the broadcaster, Bill Turnbull, on BBC News on Monday 8 June, after the local and European elections. Turnbull implied that Griffin would not represent Muslim constituents; Griffin responded that he would represent anyone that approached him, but suggested that the interests of Muslims in his constituency were served by the Labour Party and that other ethnic minorities – whose issues he would be happy to respond to - had been ignored by Labour. Griffin’s response that it would be to the Labour Party that the Muslim community would turn indicates in one sense that all parties have their preferred constituents and, that given the choice, constituents would approach the representative whose political affiliation they favour – nothing exceptional here. On the other hand, it could equally be argued that more than a preferred constituency is being referred to here; rather that implied – and overtly exclusionary – advice exists in the words ‘the Labour Party is there for them’ (BBC News, 8 June 2009).

In interviews no BNP councillor stated that he or she would refuse to address the problems of ethnic minority constituents, but, neither had any of those interviewed been
approached by someone from an ethnic minority requesting assistance. The key theme of responses being: ‘we would not refuse but we do not expect to be asked’: a pertinent and indeed shrewd response as in most cases constituents not wishing to approach the BNP have the option not to do so. However, at the time of writing, the BNP holds a full complement of seats in two wards and a majority in one; all three with populations that were reported as being over 98 per cent ‘White British’ in the 2001 UK Census (Office for National Statistics).\(^{11}\) Consequently, the representation options available to non-white residents in these wards – and indeed their experiences – require further investigation. The BNP’s three county councillors sitting for single member divisions are likely to experience an approach from an ethnic minority constituent before borough councillors and MEPs.

Though the party may no longer voice the position espoused by its first elected councillor Derek Beackon (Millwall) – who explicitly refused to represent Asian members of his community – and rejects all suggestions that it is racist on its website;\(^{12}\) and, figures such as Richard Barnbrook (Greater London Assembly member) draw attention to the various representative activities that he undertakes for non-white Londoners blaming the state not immigrants for a multi-racial Britain (BBC News, 4 September 2008);\(^{13}\) the party continues to be associated with distinctly racist politics. It voices greater commitment to representing what it describes as the ‘indigenous population’ on its website and is associated with inciting racial hatred (Griffin himself being convicted of this offence in 1998). Its members are regularly accused of making statements perceived to be racist\(^{14}\) and party literature continues to promote what appears to be a thinly veiled policy of
voluntary repatriation. While the party may argue that it articulates and provides an inclusive representation policy, it is clear that much of its activity mitigates against this image; indeed, there is much evidence to be found that seems able to refute the party’s claims. Ultimately though, what is really required is empirical evidence that proves ‘approach and refusal’, or ‘less than assiduous attention’ to a specific case: this would be difficult to prove though, as not all councillors peruse case-work in the same fashion.

So, is the BNP exceptional in the questions raised about the willingness of its councillors to ‘represent’ in the broadest terms or to conduct pastoral work? Councillors from the main parties have themselves displayed exclusive attitudes towards those they do and do not represent, with the white middle-aged, middle-class (male) a particular source of jibes and insults common amongst Labour councillors. Indeed, demonizing of the white, male, middle-aged and middle-class is commonplace in much discourse concerned with representation. Indeed, all parties have an enemy and a core-client group whose interests they seek to promote. Using here a deliberate caricature to make the point: would a Labour or Conservative councillor refuse to pursue the interests (or pursue them less diligently) of a part of the ward where they knew they received few votes and which contained their political enemy? Or would a Labour or Conservative councillor refuse to take up case-work from someone whose background they took to be ‘not one of them’ or whom they believed did not vote for them. The answer in both cases should be: ‘No’; although, let us conject that exceptions are bound to exist for more extreme-minded members of the two parties. So, if we can assume, that councillors of the main parties keep their exclusive ‘anti’ attitudes towards their class opponents to discourse only, and
do not act on them when dealing with individuals or when acting as a representative; or, that they reflect views about local concerns that cut-across and are not ideological or party-based, and that they do not refuse to take up case-work for those they perceive to be ‘other’; then should we not judge BNP councillors by these same assumptions? Indeed, we should be able to, yet, our ability to do this is mitigated against by BNP policies and rhetoric which suggest that instead of seeking to favour one group in society above another, the party actively excludes the other, to the extent that – in many respects – it gives the appearance of ignoring and rejecting the basic tenets of liberal democracy.

To summarize, the BNP councillors interviewed and studied display the same spread of focus towards policy, representation of the ward and case-work as have been noted in councillors from other parties (see Copus, 1999(a); 1999(b); 2004; 2007). It has been revealed that the BNP councillors studied sat easily within the role definitions of the *delegate*, *trustee* or *politico* and they expressed a broad belief that their election had given them a mandate to act on behalf of their communities as a ‘trustee’ of its best interests. They did not feel mandated on each and every issue before the council – even on the particularly complex and contentious issues. But in regard to the latter, the general view amongst those interviewed was that they would seek to find out the balance of opinion on issues by approaching community groups, tenants and residents associations and their own networks – all networks held by any councillor of any party are exclusive and self-selected and self-maintained, of course. BNP councillors expressed the view that acting as a trustee allowed them to use their own judgment, which in turn allowed them
to put distance between themselves and the voter and fill that void by reference to the party and the BNP group – much like any party councillor.

While BNP councillors may not refuse case work from any constituents, the question of policy raises another issue of representation. The pursuit of policy objectives and the solution of social, moral and political problems by the development of policy rests on two factors, much like pastoral care: the perceived general good; and, the particular set of interests to be promoted. Here, like other councillors, the BNP has a vision of the general local public good and of a specific group whose interest they seek to promote, much like other parties. The point of divergence for the BNP from other parties comes from whether or not the interests that policy seeks to promote are mutually exclusive or can have an inclusive element. The question remains: does any policy promoted by any party have an all-encompassing embrace, or, are there always winners and losers, within the locality? BNP councillors answered this question by indicating that they had the interests of the wider community at heart in policy development, but, that they also wished to defend those interests through appropriate policies for the communities whose interests, they argued, were under threat. They also wished to redress the preferential treatment they believed had been granted to minorities. In local policy then, the BNP can be seen to be exclusive, as indeed are all parties when it comes to giving preference their natural constituency. However, the issue here is that the BNP’s understanding of the ‘general good’ is more ideologically limited and selective than that of its modern day opponents, mainstream or otherwise. Consequently, it is not exclusion per se that is the issue, it is the nature and extent of that exclusion which is the issue.
When it comes to local issues and policy, BNP councillors will, as all councillors, listen to their constituents, but not be bound by them. In so doing, the party looms larger in councillors’ frame of reference than the community – again, not exceptional. Such findings are however mitigated by the size of the group of BNP councillors; small groups experiencing the same need to cohere in public as larger ones so as to maintain a distinct political identity. But small groups also experience internal differences of opinion yet lack the protection of a larger group; consequently they are somewhat more inclined to feel mandated by the articulated opinions of the ward, but not to the extent of rejecting their own and their party’s views.

This section of the paper concludes by drawing attention to one of the – presumably – unintended consequence of the BNP’s exclusionary approach to representation. Here we highlight the detrimental effect that the party’s presence has on some aspects of local democracy and their ability to function. While there is much to suggest that BNP presence discourages political engagement in some sectors of the population, a concrete example of how the mere presence of the party can have negative consequences for the community was recently given to these authors. It relates to the withdrawal of an application to a Small Grants Scheme that funds local initiatives in order to facilitate community empowerment and cohesion. In this instance, the application was withdrawn when it was realised that the council link to the initiative would be through an elected member of the BNP. This decision would undoubtedly have had negative repercussions for the local community in terms of the goods and services it had access to; yet, perhaps
more worryingly – for the long term at least – the decision also had implications for the health of council-community linkage and local democracy. This example draws attention to the complexity that surrounds the presence of BNP councilors. Clearly the issues at stake here do not exclusively revolve around the party and its behaviour.

**BNP councillors and the party**

The Local Government (Committees and Political Groups) Regulations 1990 require all political groups formed on councils to register with the council; a group must have two or more members to be officially recognized and to be able to claim proportional allocation of committee seats. BNP council groups will be formed as any other party groups so what we explore here is the journey of the BNP member to the council taking into account their recruitment to the party as well as the motivations which encouraged them to stand for election; second, we examine how BNP groups operate on council and whether they display the same characteristics as other party groups.

Different categories of activist can be found in the BNP’s membership and this also applies to the party’s councillors. Two types have been identified. The first can be described as the *party ideologue*, or the *party-person* (Copus, 2004). That is a party activist that joined the BNP – or any other party for that matter – with a clear commitment to its core beliefs and policies and an affinity for the party based on values coupled with a desire to promote and advance the interests of the party and those values. Such a motivated individual will fit easily into the expectations and demands of party membership and will find their own appropriate level of activity within the party.
Whether or not the party person holds any office in the party, at any level, party activity becomes almost like an obsessive hobby and such individuals are at the centre of the continued existence of any local party. They keep the machinery going, organize and administer the party, ensure it has a local public profile and above all are publicly loyal to its policies, positions and decisions – irrespective of private reservations. It is only in moments of crisis that the party-person will publicly break rank with the party, or leave it: such crises do not occur often. The BNP ideologue that joined the party will experience the same motivations to political activity experienced by members of other parties – it is simply beliefs that differ.

Not all BNP councillors are party ideologues or party persons. Rather, some joined the party through a different route and hold a different set of motivations and relationships to not only the BNP but to party politics more broadly. It is here that the BNP, in recruitment and councillor activity share some of the practices of the Liberal Democrats (see Copus, 2007). Some BNP councillors, in common party parlance, had been ‘recruited on the door-step’. One councillor summarized this in interview:

_They (BNP) came round with leaflets a few times and knocking on doors. I told them what was wrong here (she referred to a range of issues that described the run-down nature of the area and did not mention race nor throughout this interview). They came back and told me they’d got in touch with the council. After a bit they asked if I’d join and stand for the council; ...I thought they were serious_
about getting things done and none of the other parties bothered to come round, so, in the end I did it.

The BNP is in some, but not all wards they hold or have targeted, employing the type of community politics that has been so successful for the Liberal Democrats (see Copus, 2007). Moreover, BNP branches are recruiting council candidates on the doorstep. It is difficult to assess how widespread this tactic is, but it clearly links to a broader community politics approach which rests on nursing a particular ward which will include regular leaflet/newsletter delivery, locally-orientated campaigns, petitions, and the development of a high local profile for individuals who will become council candidates. Community politics rests on a collective and individual pastoral approach – pursuing grievances and promoting and defending the interests of a ward or communities within it and it extends far beyond the usual six weeks of intensive election campaigning. Voters may turn to the BNP because of the work they have done in particular areas and, more often than not, because the other parties have not responded in kind to the community politics adopted by some BNP branches.

Community politics and the recruiting of candidates from local networks has the potential to enhance electoral success for any party willing to spend the time in such work. Indeed, it is well suited to smaller parties because it does not rely on large numbers, rather on small groups of people – most obviously two or three who will become the candidates and a small group of workers from inside and outside the party. What community politics and the recruitment of candidates on the door-step does however – and this is so for the
Liberal Democrats – is to bring into the party a number of individuals who do not have an orientation towards party politics and do not necessarily place priority or even value party loyalty, discipline and cohesion. It also results in councillors being elected that have not been educated at the school of hard-knocks politics and have not experienced the rough-and-tumble of party political life.

BNP council groups can consist of the *party ideologue* and the *community councillor*. The existence of these two types can generate problems for group cohesion in council meetings, with the community councillor feeling less inclined to follow a line with which he or she disagrees. Here again, we see similarities with Liberal Democrat groups, whose fissiparous tendencies are often exacerbated by an underlining dislike of party discipline – despite most Liberal Democrat groups generally cohering in public. None of the BNP interviewees admitted knowledge of any nationally produced group standing orders (again, many Liberal Democrats interviewed for other research have been unaware of the national standing orders produced by the Association of Liberal Democrat Councillors). The small size of most BNP groups makes strict adherence to such rules unnecessary – although no doubt other parties would pounce on any public disagreements between BNP councillors, as they do with public disagreements between councillors of any party.

It is not possible to consider all BNP councillors to be party ideologues dedicated to pursuing particular political ideals. Rather, we must be cautious in considering the nature of BNP groups and the approach their councillors take to local politics and their relationship with the wider party. What we see here is that the BNP, when it comes to
local politics, is growing in maturity and balancing its core beliefs with the need to reach further into communities than those core beliefs might otherwise allow if it is to win council seats.

**Conclusion**

The BNP has not made a major breakthrough into councils across the country. It has, made very slow progress in increasing the number of its council seats and that growth has been far slower than parties such as the Greens. Yet the party is now a feature of the local political landscape in many localities and cannot easily be dismissed as an aberration. So, is the party exceptional? It would be fair to conclude that assertions suggesting that BNP councillors are poor meeting attendees; do not take a full part when they do turn-up; do not understand council procedures; are badly behaved; and are successfully isolated and ignored by other parties to such an extent that they can and do not achieve anything as councillors has been exaggerated, to some extent. While some BNP councillors do behave in this way, our research suggests that similarly, some do not and in the absence of extensive research across all councils where the party is represented, a conclusive answer cannot be provided on this.

Like their contemporaries, BNP council groups have their policy and governing focused specialists, who take a keen interest in broad policy agendas. They have councillors that are pastoral in nature and focus on the collective well-being of their wards and of individuals within them. While others look to the party, ideology, core-values or a key constituency when it comes to making-decisions; others look to their ward or groups
within it. Here, BNP councillors reflect the style and focus adopted by councillors from all parties. In terms of broad representation, BNP councillors pursue the interests of what they perceive to be their core constituents. All parties seek to protect and promote the interests of a core constituency and reach beyond that constituency for two reasons: first, a genuine desire to promote a wider set of interests; second as a catch-all election ploy to obtain political office.

When it comes to ward representation, BNP councillors have displayed the loyalty and concern for – the majority – of their patch and that would be expected of any councillor. Dealing with the problems of individuals within that patch is a more ambiguous area, given that ethnicity plays a part. Personalities also have a stake in the complex relationships between elected representatives and those that seek their assistance on individual issues. We would suggest that a watching brief is kept on the development of this – but as we write, BNP councillors are providing advice surgeries and advertising them to all-comers on council websites. Yet, given the understandable reticence many non-white ward members may have in terms of attending these surgeries, the absence of an overt effort by the party to quell such concerns should be perceived as significant.

Finally, we found little that evidences BNP exceptionalism as a group of councillors if they are considered in isolation. Rather, what has been found to be exceptional – compared to other parties – is the way in which their particular ontology appears to sit with accepted norms, and the reactions that their representative presence has provoked: by councillors from other parties, the media and political pressure groups. However, the
party does not exist in a vacuum and must be evaluated its operational context. When it is, the BNP appears somewhat more exceptional; not so much in its conduct of council activities but in the nature of its preferred constituencies and the responses this generates. Indeed, it seems to be here that we find the kernel of BNP ‘exceptionalism’ in local government.

Notes

1 Research for this chapter was undertaken with the assistance of research grant F.094.AP ‘Small parties: Influence and effect on democratic engagement and local politics’ from the Leverhulme Trust.

2 Stoke-on-Trent.

3 Nuneaton and Bedworth, Rotherham, Amber Valley, Thurrock, Three Rivers, Pendle and Calderdale.

4 Previously nine seats.

5 ICHC secured power on Wyre Forest District Council in 1999 and remains there having participated in a number of administrations; currently it constitutes the official opposition. Its MP, Dr Richard Taylor was returned to his second term at Westminster in 2005. The Boston Bypass Independents took 25 of the 32 seats on Boston Borough Council in 2007. Though somewhat depleted in numbers the group still holds a majority and runs the Council.

6 For example, Richard Barnbrook, BNP councillor for Barking and Dagenham and member of the London Assembly was recently suspended for a month from his local council for making incorrect comments on local knife crime, which he refused to fully retract (Drillsma-Milgram, 2009: 1).

7 For example refer to English Standards (formerly Standards Board for England) provides information relating to this. Other examples include accusations (though also acquittal) of electoral fraud in Birmingham (BBC News 4 April 2005); ballot fraud accusations (though acquittal) in Tower Hamlets, BBC London (BBC News 3 October 2005); and Labour bullying in Coventry (BBC News 21 October 2004).

8 Amid high levels of protest and controversy, BNP leader Nick Griffin was included on the panel of BBC Questions Time in October 2009.
9 Here we refer to Burnley, Epping Forest, Barking and Dagenham and Stoke on Trent councils.

10 See Hazel Blears’ (then Communities Secretary) comments about mainstream parties abandoning section of the white working class (Telegraph, 22 November 2008). Refer also to a recent publication by Communities and Local Government that draws attention to these issues, highlighting working-class perceptions of unequal distribution of resources, see Communities and Local Government, Sources of Resentment, and perceptions of Ethnic Minorities among Poor White People in England, Crown Copyright (2009). See also Hazel Blears’ comments about white working-class ‘fears’ (Telegraph View, 2 January 2009).

11 All three in Abbey Green ward and Bentlee Townsend ward; two out of three in Weston and Meir ward North’ (Stoke-on-Trent City Council).

12 See most recently Nick Griffin’s appearance on Question Time (22 October 2009).

13 Barnbrook has also voiced a commitment to representing the ‘real [one must assume white] people of London’ (BBC News, 4 September 2008).

14 For example, the party’s link between Islam and Pakistan and British communities experiencing problems with hard drugs. Deputy Party Leader Simon Darby accused the Arch Bishop of York John Sentamu of interfering in British politics suggesting that if ‘foreigners’ meddled in Ugandan they would be attacked with spears (The Guardian 6 May 2009). Since his election to the European Parliament Griffin has suggested the sinking of boats containing illegal immigrants might disincentivize attempts to enter Britain (BBC News 8 August 2009).
Bibliography


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**Table 1: British National Party Seat percentages in England (May 2008-May 2009)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNCIL</th>
<th>BNP SEATS/ SEAT PERCENTAGE</th>
<th>COUNCIL CONTROL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>COUNTY COUNCILS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Hertfordshire</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Lancashire</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Leicestershire</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>DISTRICT COUNCILS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Amber Valley</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Boston</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Burnley</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Charnwood</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Epping Forest</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. North West Leicestershire</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Nuneaton and Bedworth</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Pendle</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Redditch</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Seven Oaks</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Staffordshire Moorlands</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Three Rivers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LONDON BOROUGH</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16. Redbridge</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17. Barking and Dagenham</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18. Havering</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>METROPOLITIC BOROUGHS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19. Bradford</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20. Calderdale</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21. Kirklees&lt;sup&gt;1st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22. Leeds</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23. Rotherham&lt;sup&gt;1st&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>1 (2)</td>
<td>2% (3%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24. Sandwell</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25. Solihul</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UNITARY COUNCILS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26. Stoke on Trent</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27. Thurrock</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source:* Local Council Political Positions; Council Websites; Hope Not Hate Complete List of BNP Councillors [12.05.2009; 22.05.2009]

*Notes:* C = Conservative; L = Labour; LD = Liberal Democrat; I = Independent; NOC = No Overall Control; Maj = Majority; Min = Minority
Table 2: British National Party Councillor attendance at Full Council in Burnley, Epping Forest, Barking and Dagenham and Stoke on Trent (May 2008-May 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COUNCIL</th>
<th>BNP attendance</th>
<th>Non BNP average attendance</th>
<th>All councillor average attendance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>DISTRICT COUNCILS</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Burnley</td>
<td>9/11 (82%)</td>
<td>9/11 (82%)</td>
<td>9/11 (82%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Epping Forest</td>
<td>6/7 (86%)</td>
<td>6/7 (86%)</td>
<td>6/7 (86%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>LONDON BOROUGH</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Barking and Dagenham</td>
<td>6/9 (66%)</td>
<td>7/9 (77%)</td>
<td>7/9 (77%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>UNITARY COUNCIL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Stoke on Trent</td>
<td>11/12 (92%)</td>
<td>11/12 (92%)</td>
<td>11/12 (92%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Council Websites; Local Council Political Compositions*

*Note: Attendance and percentage figures calculated to the nearest full number*