

Britain's populist radical right: a brief overview

by Michael Cragg



Since the heyday of Britain's National Front (NF) in the late 1970s, no single party of the radical right has been able to continually dominate and consolidate their position to any great effect. Many have tried; without being exhaustive, these include the British National Party (BNP) in numerous forms, reconstituted elements of the original NF, and smaller sectarian groupings with limited recognition and support. To varying degrees, these organisations relegated themselves to the fringes of mainstream politics through their espousal of outwardly offensive and inherently unpopular policies and rhetoric. For instance, as Nigel Copsey notes, one of the National Front's official organs, *Bulldog*, was not averse to running headlines such as “We don't want wogs [...] we want jobs!”

With the advent of France's Front national (FN), however, the parties of the populist radical right inherited a new blueprint for their parliamentary aims, one followed by dozens of similarly-positioned parties throughout Europe in subsequent years. By the late 1990s, the BNP, under the guidance (and, ultimately, leadership) of Nick Griffin, borrowed the ideas and strategies of the FN

almost wholesale, engaging in a considered moderation of their more extreme public statements, and moving closer to (though always remaining outside) the acceptable mainstream. Ukip took a profoundly different route, almost an opposing image of the BNP's path, with the party moving further to the populist radical right and becoming ever more consumed with issues relating to immigration. Hans-Georg Betz spoke, twenty years ago, about the European phenomenon of populist radical right-wing parties being split into two sides of the same coin: on the one hand, national populist parties appealing primarily to a working-class base through a radically xenophobic program, and on the other, neo-liberal populist parties which “tend to stress the market-oriented, libertarian elements of their program over xenophobic ones”. These two classifications certainly appear to be relevant in the comparison between the BNP and Ukip.



National Front Meeting in 2012. [Craig Willy](#).

Of course, drawing such a comparison is always likely to provoke controversy. The perception of Ukip in some quarters as the “[polite alternative](#)” to the BNP has invited criticism from some sections of the mainstream media, as well as Ukip themselves. The Ukip response, seemingly invoking the typology constructed by Betz, appears to concentrate more on the economic differences between the two parties; a spokesman for the party has claimed that “Ukip and the BNP aren't the same thing. We are free-trading globalists and they are nationalists and socialists. People from the left-of-centre want to demonise us”. While this appeal to their fiscal differences is undoubtedly valid, many would dispute the idea of Ukip rejecting the nationalist label, including a reasonable share of the party's potential electorate. The party itself makes little political capital from its staunchly pro-market

agenda; it would not be unreasonable to argue that many of its potential voters are almost unaware of some of its more radical economic policies (such as, for instance, its desire to instate a flat tax rate). Neither the BNP nor Ukip seek to promote their fiscal policies as heavily as the three main parties, however. Being essentially destined for opposition, at best, allows parties of their ilk the opportunity not to present exhaustive, carefully costed budgetary plans; any appeal to the problematic nature of their financial policy is typically given short shrift by such parties, allowing them to maintain their status as political outsiders.



BNP youngsters (Looking for trouble).

In terms of social policy, the difference between the BNP and Ukip is smaller than either would care to admit. Probably the main divergence is on issues of what the BNP label “voluntary” repatriation of immigrants. The official line of Ukip is that only illegal immigrants will be removed from the country, along with a five year immigration freeze, though neither of these policies are possible with the UK’s continued membership of the EU – another convenient reason for Ukip to desire the UK’s exit from the body. The discourse from some areas of the party, however, suggests a rather troubling attitude towards immigrants and other out-groups. Lord Pearson, a one-time leader of the party, suggests that the future of the UK is under threat because [“the Muslims are breeding ten times faster than us”](#). The party’s own policy initiatives included popular radical right staples such as banning the burqa, removing benefits for immigrants, and demanding an end to “political correctness”, all of which, as Matthew Goodwin states, have been similarly proposed by the BNP.

The parties also share what Nicolo Conti terms “an ideological pillar of radical right parties”: namely, Euroscepticism. In the case of Ukip, the party's foundation was predicated entirely on an opposition to the European Union, borne out of the Anti-Federalist League and its campaign against the Maastricht Treaty of 1992. Over time, many of these original members drifted away from the party, with some actively distancing themselves from what they interpreted as its growing radicalism. Founding member Alan Sked, who left the party in 1997, later claimed it to be “racist” and “infected by the far right”; he [has also stated](#) in a leading national newspaper that, on certain issues related to the EU, Ukip “is even less liberal than the BNP” and that “[c]ertainly, there is a symbiosis between elements of the parties”. Following the party's successful campaigning for the UK's local elections in 2013, Sked [reiterated his criticisms](#), describing the party as going “completely fruitcake”. Ukip opposition to the EU is, as Betz hypothesises, less obviously xenophobic than that of the BNP; instead, party literature focuses heavily on the amount of money Britain ostensibly could save through leaving the union, though both parties use the suggestion, or indeed the threat, of mass immigration from new EU states as a method of gaining votes.

The views of BNP and Ukip voters themselves tend to overlap in the parties' key areas. In his 2012 survey, in which he collaborated with Jocelyn Evans, Goodwin observes that nearly half of Ukip-identifying respondents “ranked either immigration or Muslims in Britain as the most important issues facing Britain today”, while more than half “rejected the suggestion that Britain has benefited from diversity”. While Ukip does not make such out-group demonisation a cornerstone of its public discourse, it appears content to allow its electoral base the opportunity to effectively “read between the lines” and make associations between their own opinions and the rhetoric of the party. Many have done just that, and have seized the opportunity to back an organisation which has felt the need to take time to publicly declare itself a “non-racist party”.

The “protest vote” factor is also critical, not just in the cases of the BNP and Ukip, but of populist radical right parties throughout Europe more generally. Many observers have noted that such parties tend to thrive during periods of political dissatisfaction; the situation in the UK, with two of the three main parties tainted by their involvement in an unpopular coalition government, and the third seemingly offering little but tokenistic and confused opposition, creates fertile ground for a self-proclaimed anti-establishment party to gain a foothold. In other areas of the UK, this frustration manifests itself in different ways; indeed, some would argue that the rise in support for Scottish

independence would not have been possible without the broad rejection of the established political classes.



A classic UKIP slogan (YSS).

Perhaps one of the most notable findings of Goodwin and Evans' report is the age base of potential populist radical right supporters. While younger adherents are more inclined towards the BNP, and more recently, the far-right EDL street protest movement, 35% of over-65s chose to identify with Ukip. Many of these supporters would likely consider themselves naturally conservative in both political inclination and party affiliation, but find themselves disenchanted by the attempts at social modernisation undergone by the Conservative Party of David Cameron. These possible grievances also air themselves in Goodwin and Evans' survey of Ukip supporters' beliefs; the vast majority of those surveyed would support the return of the death penalty, claim that young people "don't have enough respect for British values", and feel that the welfare state makes people less willing to look after themselves. Interestingly, an almost identical number of BNP and Ukip supporters believe that censorship is sometimes justified to protect moral standards, a fact which appears to contradict both the more actively authoritarian approach taken by the BNP, and the libertarian posturing adopted by Ukip.

More of Goodwin and Evans' analysis backs up Betz's consideration that national populist parties, the more obviously radical, tend to gain greater levels of support from working class voters. This is certainly the case with the BNP, which takes more than half its support from the manual working class. Ukip, conversely, gains the majority of its support from professionals and managers, though this is by no means a large majority, and the party enjoys a wide range of support from across social classes. Its broad, populist approach effectively allows it to deliver vote-winning policies across societal cleavages, appealing to different sectors of the electorate with different promises.

Despite the policy similarities between the two parties, Ukip appears to be a more acceptable and respectable party in the view of the electorate. Much of this is simply determined by the history of the two parties; however many times BNP leaders claim not to be racist, playing down any references to ethnic nationalism or racial supremacy, their past is not forgotten by analysts, the media, and by extension, the electorate. Ukip, by contrast, largely has no such past to forget, and unlike most political bodies, has arguably become more radical over the course of time. The difference between the parties is reinforced by attitudes within sections of the electorate. Many voters who have considered voting, or have voted, for Ukip on the basis of policy profess a presumably sincere distaste for the BNP, in spite of their similarities. Some of those who would potentially select Ukip as a protest vote are similarly disinclined toward other populist radical right groups, though this is likely due to reduced party awareness or a perceived futility at entrusting a vote to a smaller groupuscule.

The parties also compete between themselves, knowing that both will take votes away from the other. The Ukip leader Nigel Farage has stated that, by offering a tough stance on immigration, “we [Ukip] have actually taken away one-third of the BNP vote. Nobody has done more to damage the BNP in British politics”. In the lead-up to the 2013 local elections, numerous Ukip candidates were found to be members, or former members, of the BNP. For their part, the BNP and Griffin have encouraged entryism into Ukip for the purposes of furthering their own ideas within that party; in an article on the BNP website, Griffin encouraged “genuine nationalists” to “play a valuable role in the next stage of nationalism’s Long March: They should join Ukip, if necessary under false names [...] the curious long-term role of Ukip in the providential order of things will then one day become clear”. This symbiotic relationship is one of the primary reasons that drawing a comparison between the two parties is, in this author's view, acceptable; both parties are ultimately competing for the same core vote, and the success of one is almost necessarily related with the failure of the other.

Much is made of the fascist history of some BNP members. In some European countries, of course, a party having an avowed fascist or neo-fascist past would provide little barrier at all to electoral success – for instance, the MSI in Italy or the FN in France – and in certain extreme circumstances, even a party being currently neo-fascist does not sufficiently repulse the electorate (see the hugely troubling example of Golden Dawn in Greece). In Britain, however, the circumstances are markedly different. Much is made in popular discourse of the role the country had in fighting fascism during the Second World War, and naked appeals to fascist or neo-Nazi politics often face unflattering

rebukes from all sides. As such, the far right in the country has traditionally sought to co-opt this history to its own end; BNP publications and electoral leaflets have often featured symbols of the British fight against fascism, such as Spitfire planes, and Nick Griffin himself even claimed that [Winston Churchill would have been a member of the BNP](#). Such attempts at appropriating these symbols are typically met with disdain by the majority of the electorate, though this has not stopped Ukip similarly invoking Churchill in the past. In general, however, for these reasons, Ukip is certainly better-placed to achieve a level of success in the UK that the BNP could never have hoped to attain.



A demonstration in London against UKIP and BNP ([Demotix](#)).

Notwithstanding some superficial similarities in their methods, Ukip has a very different policy to the BNP with regard to publicity-seeking; it traditionally uses a broader approach in its opposition to immigration, as opposed to the BNP, which targets clearly delineated and discrete out-groups. This attitude has manifested in the past through outspoken condemnation of crimes it sees as racially prejudiced against white people; for instance, in the terrorist incident of May 2013, in which an off-duty soldier was murdered in the streets of London, the BNP attempted to use the act for its own propaganda purposes, with its leader passing public judgement on the murder while laying flowers at the site of the soldier's death (an act which he was, in typical fashion, [keen to have photographed](#)

[and publicised](#)). Conversely, the Ukip leadership has kept its own counsel throughout the event and its aftermath, studiously avoiding any public pronouncements which may be seen as inflammatory or reactionary, and being at great pains to [encourage their membership to behave in the same way](#). The party typically gains its mainstream coverage in more nuanced ways, leading to some criticism of the media outlets which appear disproportionately, and sometimes sympathetically, to cover the activities of Ukip and its leader; following the party's recent successes in local elections, the British satirist Ian Hislop, speaking on the long-running topical comedy show *Have I Got News For You*, made the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that Ukip is paying the BBC for its coverage. In the heavily opinionated and forceful world of the British press, Ukip receives favourable coverage from right-wing newspapers such as the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express*, where the BNP as a party have never been officially tolerated (even if some of their policies have been tacitly viewed in an approving light).

The issue of disproportionate coverage certainly appears a valid one. In the run-up to the local elections of May 2013, Ukip seemed to receive levels of coverage which were out of proportion to their current levels of influence; while other smaller parties such as the Greens have parliamentary representation (unlike Ukip), their media coverage was kept to a minimum. The higher level of coverage granted to Ukip itself constitutes a type of positive feedback loop, in which greater publicity leads to more political acceptance, leading to ever-higher levels of publicity. Furthermore, unlike a party such as the Greens, Ukip are seemingly never far from controversy; whether this takes the form of a candidate being photographed [appearing to give a Nazi salute](#), or leader Nigel Farage being [barricaded inside a pub](#) by left-wing and pro-independence demonstrators in Scotland, the party is always capable of allowing the media an excuse to report on it.

In terms of the party's assets, perhaps the greatest one available to it at this moment in time is Nigel Farage. This has not occurred by chance; the party is effectively built to primarily accommodate Farage and his political aims, while promoting his charismatic, populist approach to politics. Much of Ukip's success is down to his role and its representation by the media. Bearing more than a passing resemblance to Jörg Haider, the late former leader of Austria's radical populist right FPÖ, Farage, rarely sighted in public without a pint of beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, is unquestionably a populist, and appears to enjoy positioning himself as a “man of the people”, despite apparently [making £200,000 a year as a commodities broker at the age of just 21](#). At a point in time where a great deal of populist anger is manifested against bankers, City traders

and those in similar positions, Farage has undoubtedly been brilliant at cultivating his own public image; far better than the largely inept Griffin, who was described in many quarters after a television appearance in 2010 as looking little but “shifty”. This may, however, come at a cost for the long-term survival of the party as a whole; many commentators, and at least one former member, accuse Ukip of being essentially merely a vehicle for Farage himself. Marta Andreasen, a former Ukip MEP who defected to the Conservative Party, described the party as “a one-man band who heads a boys club” where “women with strong characters are not welcomed”.

The apparent success of Ukip has had influence far beyond the party's own borders; in many ways, it has shifted the discourse throughout the three main political parties in the UK towards the right, especially with regard to the issue of immigration. Diane Abbott, a one-time candidate for the Labour Party leadership, has felt the need to encourage her party not to [“take the wrong lessons”](#) from the surge in Ukip support, while other left-wing commentators have suggested a “no platform” policy as a means of dealing with the party.

At this moment in time, it is difficult to say whether or not Ukip will remain as the UK's permanent representative on the populist radical right. They have successfully illustrated, along with the BNP before them, that there is room in British politics for a strongly anti-immigration, anti-establishment party, though this news was nothing new; it has also existed in some sectors of the mainstream Conservative Party in the past. Examples from elsewhere in Europe offer little further clarification, as some parties in Ukip's position have thrived, while others have quickly become electorally insignificant after a surge in popularity. The consistently strong showing of Ukip in European elections may indicate a prolonged stay in the limelight, though the party's dependence on its leader does not bode well for its long-term prospects. As for the BNP, they appear to be very much yesterday's men, a party barely seen as worthy of coverage by many sectors of the media, and currently only championed by hardened long-term activists. Ukip's rise, as Farage states, has helped enormously in shaping this state of affairs, but as of this moment, it is unclear whether Ukip is destined to meet the same end as the BNP.

First picture: Nigel Farage, UKIP's leader. (The Telegraph)