

## The British National Party's modernization strategy didn't appeal to voters, and its activist and membership base is shrinking by the day. But public hostility toward immigration means the prospects for the far right remain strong

*Faced with a climate of public hostility over immigration, the far right British National Party (BNP) could not have chosen a more promising time to launch an electoral strategy than when Nick Griffin took leadership in 1999. Though the party failed to connect with voters over the long term, as [Dr Matthew Goodwin](#) discusses, there remains considerable potential for a more articulate successor.*



The government recently announced further proposals to curb immigration and reduce levels of net migration to below 100,000. Following earlier restrictions on the number of non-European skilled workers, these plans will make it more difficult for families to bring dependents into the UK, introduce tougher English language standards, closer scrutiny of sham marriages and extend the probation period under which spouses and partners of migrants can apply for settlement. The plans form part of the Conservatives' broader attempt to reduce overall levels of immigration to the 'tens of thousands', and reassure an electorate that has become highly concerned about this issue. The proposals, however, have already come under fire, with some estimating they will reduce net migration by no more than 8,000 per year. It is also unlikely that large numbers of voters will either notice these changes, or feel their effects.

The simple reality is that due to earlier migration patterns, international treaties and family migration, the government now has much less control over an issue that, since 2001, has surged to the forefront of the public mindset. The reduced capacity of government to deliver the public's desired outcome (to reduce the number of immigrants) is not lost on ordinary voters. Throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century, and despite extensive legislative action on issues like asylum, large majorities of voters consistently rejected the suggestion that the Labour governments had sensible policies on this issue, were making progress in these areas or were simply being open and honest about the scale of immigration into Britain.

This dissatisfaction combined with public hostility toward immigration and rising diversity has cultivated large amounts of potential support for far right parties. This potential is evident in a range of surveys and polls, which reveal the extent to which Britons have become profoundly anxious about the impact of immigration not only on economic goods but also values, culture and ways life. Clearly, other trends have also contributed: the convergence of Labour and the Conservatives on the centre ground; the continual erosion of bonds between voters and the main parties; the rise of issue-based voting; and growing public anxiety over the presence and perceived role of Muslims in British society. When seen as a whole, these trends have produced a favourable climate for parties that rally against rising diversity and the 'out-of-touch' establishment.

Faced with this climate, the far right British National Party (BNP) could not have chosen a more promising time to launch an electoral strategy. In many respects, the far right in Britain had never had it so good. I interviewed Nick Griffin six times while writing my new book, and during one interview he described the party that he took over in 1999 as being "just a little East London party with a couple of odds and sods". Under Griffin, however, the party set out to capitalize on those trends above: it invested in community-based activism; distanced itself from its neo-Nazi roots; and attempted to detoxify the brand. In this way, the BNP would assemble a broad and stable coalition of voters similar to those recruited by the likes of Jean-Marie Le Pen in France or Jörg Haider in Austria.

Seeking to emulate these far more successful radical right entrepreneurs, the BNP aimed to reach out beyond its traditional base of poorly educated, working class men. Instead, it would extend its appeal to women, the young and the old, and to both the working classes and economically insecure sections of the lower middle classes. Instead of relying solely on the dwindling number of 'traditional racists' in society, the party would break through into the mainstream by also appealing to those large numbers of Britons who, on the one hand, distanced themselves from the more socially unacceptable forms of racism but who, on the other, remained deeply sceptical about immigration and its effects.

So did this strategy of 'modernization' work? Given the recent demise of the BNP the answer is clearly no. At

local elections in May its vote collapsed. In less than 18 months, it has not only lost 45 of its 55 councillors and a seat on the Greater London Assembly, it has also lost its claim to be the fastest growing party in British politics. Its activist and membership base is shrinking by the day. There is little money or enthusiasm to invest in campaigns and, in response, the party has begun to implode from within. Griffin is now facing a serious challenge from activists who claim he is incompetent, corrupt and can no longer deliver success. Should these rebels fail in their quest to oust Griffin, this will almost certainly spark a mass exodus from the party.

In a nutshell, the prospect of the BNP achieving a major breakthrough via the ballot box is gone. It is by looking within the bases of support for the BNP that we find the reasons for its demise. Despite its best efforts, Griffin's party quickly fell dependent on a limited base of 'angry white men'. Much like those who voted for its predecessor in the 1970s, the National Front (NF), the BNP recruited supporters from the working classes, though especially skilled workers who have more to lose from immigration and rising diversity. They are profoundly pessimistic about their future economic prospects, and get their news and information from one of three xenophobic tabloid newspapers (I'll let you guess which ones). But compared with their NF-voting predecessors, they are also much older.

The BNP is an ageing party that failed to connect with younger Britons. It has also failed to entice women, the better educated and members of the lower middle classes who helped propel parties like the Austrian Freedom Party into coalition government. Its supporters are also more likely than other Britons to endorse the most openly racist views, for example that black Britons are intellectually inferior to white Britons or that employers should favour whites when hiring new workers. Foremost, these citizens are driven to the BNP by a 'potent combination' of anti-immigrant hostility and political dissatisfaction. In fact, these levels of dissatisfaction are so high that it is doubtful that these citizens can ever be won back into mainstream party politics. But the continued importance of traditional racist hostility to the BNP vote provides us with further evidence that the party has failed to penetrate that large reservoir of 'immigration sceptics', and instead has pinned its fortunes on a smaller and dwindling base of 'traditional racists'.

Despite its efforts, seen through the eyes of ordinary voters the BNP never escaped from the [toxic legacy from which it was born](#). While it has rallied a coalition of angry white men, most Britons reached the same conclusion about the party. It is simply not a legitimate and credible alternative. Even in the aftermath of *Question Time*, when Griffin could pitch his message to over eight million viewers, only 4 per cent of the electorate said they would definitely consider voting for his party.

But while the BNP might not have won these voters over, there remains considerable potential for a more articulate successor. In one form or another, the far right looks set to remain as a permanent fixture on the landscape. The trends that fuelled the rise of the BNP – public hostility toward immigration, political dissatisfaction with the main parties and anxiety over Muslim communities – are unlikely to subside. On the contrary, there are good reasons to expect that these trends will cultivate further potential for the far right. The key question, as we look toward the future, is whether there will emerge a movement that is more capable of translating this potential into wider support.

***Dr Matthew Goodwin's new book, [The New British Fascism: Rise of the BNP](#), is out now. Follow him on [Twitter](#).***