

We need to wake up and tackle BNP poison head on

This racist party stands on the brink of electoral breakthrough. We must fight them as we did the National Front in the 70s, writes **Peter Hain MP**

Unless the rest of us get our act together, the British National party could easily win three seats - and quite possibly six or more - in June's European elections. To win in the north-west it needs just 8% of the vote, barely 1.5% more than it got in 2004 - the days of near full employment and before the credit crunch; in the West Midlands only an extra 1.6%; and in Yorkshire and the Humber just 4.3% more. Recently the party has won council seats in byelections, polling - according to the BBC - an average of 14% in 60 wards: close to the threshold necessary to get a seat in almost every European constituency in Britain.

Electorally the BNP has become the most successful fascist party in Britain, gaining 800,000 votes in the 2004 European elections and 238,000 votes in the 2006 local elections - up from 3,022 six years earlier. And last year it won its first seat in the London assembly, doubling its support to 130,000 votes. And now the BNP is looking to benefit from a collapsing Ukip vote; in 2004 the combined BNP-Ukip vote stood at 21%.

Winning European seats would secure an unprecedented platform, and entitle the BNP to draw hundreds of thousands of euros from Brussels indirectly to buttress its full-time personnel and organisation. At the moment, apparently, the BNP's sole London member has to spend much of his time building up support for the party outside London.

It would also be able to work with other far-right and fascist parties in Europe, as Jean-Marie Le Pen's party has done from its base in France since winning 10 European seats in 1984.

With unemployment and job insecurity rising, some major construction sites appearing to bar local unionised labour, and affordable housing in short supply, there are classic

conditions for the BNP's racist and fascist politics to thrive.

Thirty years ago rising unemployment and economic decline under Labour saw the BNP's predecessor, the National Front, also do worryingly well in elections. I helped to found the Anti-Nazi League in 1977 to target the National Front, and a mass campaign helped to put it out of business a few years later. Anti-Nazi League supporters developed their own initiatives, from Miners Against the Nazis to Skinheads Against the Nazis. There was even a Skateboarders Against the Nazis. With its sister group Rock Against Racism, the ANL organised huge national carnivals and local gigs, as rock music culture reaching millions was successfully fused with radical politics that traditionally had reached only thousands.

The lesson of the Anti-Nazi League's success is that the BNP needs to be confronted wherever its supporters march or appear in public; and they must also be denied platforms to spread their hate. This was the lesson of the 1930s when Blackshirts led by Oswald Mosley targeting Jewish communities in London's East End were physically stopped in Cable Street in October 1936.

But the BNP leaders are more sophisticated than the old National Front. They wear suits rather than openly flirt with nazism. They sound smooth and plausible on radio or TV. They are exploiting alienation from Westminster politics, particularly among the white working class.

Yet their politics are fundamentally similar: the scapegoating of black people, Muslims, Jews, foreigners, gays and lesbians for social and economic problems. Whenever they are ascendant locally, racial violence and racial hatred are barely beneath the surface.

Although desperate to conceal its fascist and racist instincts, the BNP is the National Front reincarnated - albeit using modern spin and the internet, coupled with a community-based politics that thrives on grievances about "British jobs for British workers".

To confront the BNP's threat, the priority must be grassroots campaigning. Labour must win back trust by fielding candidates rooted in their communities and pledged to deliver on local issues. That was successful in Tameside, Keighley and Telford, for example - but sadly not in Sevenoaks last February, where the BNP took a "safe" Labour ward.

All the main parties, Labour especially, must shake off their complacency and take on the BNP directly. Its poison should be combated on the doorstep, through leafleting and campaigning. Labour candidates and campaigners should work with those from Unite Against Fascism (uaf.org.uk) and Stop the BNP (stopthebnp.org.uk). Both organisations are mobilising a new generation of activists and concerned people from trade unions, churches and other organisations.

The aim should be simple but clear: to stop the BNP gaining seats anywhere in Britain, but especially in Europe on June 4.

Peter Hain is the Labour MP for Neath. Reprinted from the Guardian, 29 April 2009

