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By Arun Kundnani

There's nothing very contentious in this article on 'mainstream' coverage of 'far'-right politics, but Arun Kundnani of the Institute of Race Relations at least gets somewhere near acknowledging the fundamental common ground between the BNP platform and the liberal sentiment that deplores failure to 'integrate' both by a 'racist' white working class and by migrant cultural 'others'. Just like organized racists, orthodox opinion-formers must at all costs conceal the ongoing generalized upward, public-to-private transfer of wealth in employment, welfare, housing, consumer credit etc; both positions must attribute the resulting social dysfunction to cultural differences between various groups ripped off in the resource grab. The fascists and the liberals maintain their traditional interdependence, then: for both parties, the basic premise is naturalized inasmuch as it's shared by antagonists supposedly so far removed. Kundnani ends with a cautious, reasonable proposal for more efficient anti-fascist campaigning. A more forthright approach might insist that the BNP betrays its own avowed constituency: if the white working class blames scarcity on competitors for the scraps remaining, there will be no limit to expropriation from above.

How the BNP entered the political mainstream By Arun Kundnani 4 May 2006, 11:00pm

Recently published research gives us more data on where support for the British National Party comes from. But, in common with most analysts, it downplays the most important factor in the BNP's rise: the legitimacy given to the party's views by mainstream politicians and even liberal commentators. In 1993, Derek Beackon became the BNP's first elected official, winning a council by-election on the Isle of Dogs in east London. The shockwaves that were sent out from his election made Beackon a household name and his victory was perceived as a matter of shame for a nation that liked to think itself immune to the kind of racism and nationalism then emerging across the rest of Europe. But, within months, Beackon had been removed from office, not because of a diminishing BNP vote but because of the massive, united campaign that was organised to defeat the far-Right party, resulting in a high turnout of anti-BNP voters in the May 1994 election. Thus, the BNP's early-1990s entry into elected politics was short-lived. Twelve years later, the situation is entirely different. In today's local elections, the BNP increased its total number of local authority seats from twenty to around forty. At the general election a year ago, the BNP won 4.3 per cent of the vote across the 116 seats that it contested and, in the previous year, the party narrowly missed obtaining a place on the Greater London Assembly. Moreover, the sense of shame that attached itself to BNP support in the early 1990s is eroding. The BNP is now often referred to as a 'legitimate' political party and its spokesmen and women are routinely interviewed on key political programmes such as BBC Radio 4's Today programme. The BNP has achieved the objective of entering the political mainstream that Nick Griffin set when he assumed its leadership in 1999. According to conventional wisdom, there are a number of factors that explain this development. Commentators tend to focus on Nick Griffin himself and what is reckoned to be his smart rebranding of the party to focus on immigration and Islam. Others point to the failure of mainstream political parties to engage with White working-class communities. New research Both these suggestions are endorsed by the report *The British National Party: the roots of its appeal*, published recently by the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust (JRCT). It argues that the increasing tendency of the major political parties to compete for a narrow band of middle-class voters in swing seats has given the BNP an opportunity to present itself in Labour's traditional heartlands as the true representative of the White working class. Drawing together a selection of opinion poll and focus group data, along with analysis of recent election results, the report also suggests that: * between 18 and 24 per cent of the electorate might consider voting for the BNP; * there is no relationship between low voter turnout and support for the BNP; * support for the BNP does not come from places where

the poorest and most deprived people in British society live but from areas with skilled or semi-skilled workers; * White people who vote for the BNP tend to live in wards which are predominantly White rather than in mixed areas; * immigration and asylum have become symbols for failures in other policy areas, such as education and housing; * a significant number of voters consider a vote for the BNP to be an effective way of sending a message to the political establishment, even though they would not want the BNP itself to obtain power. The report paints a picture of support, above all, for the BNP's message, rather than for the party itself, among a substantial pocket of the White working class. These supporters largely do not wish the BNP to actually obtain control of local authorities but, to varying degrees, they endorse its anti-Islam and anti-immigration stance. These are people who 'probably do not have direct contact with non-white people, but gain their views in the media and from direct campaigns from the BNP supporters themselves. This makes challenging the stereotypes in the media an important priority as does campaigning on the ground.' But the JRCT report shies away from further analysing this relationship between potential BNP support and the climate created by media pundits and politicians. Whereas in the early 1990s, the BNP's views on immigration were taboo, today, even across much of the liberal and centre Left, that taboo has been jettisoned. New convergence Of course, there is nothing new in popular right-wing newspapers adopting an anti-immigrant line. But the last few years have seen unprecedented levels of anti-immigrant rhetoric, particularly against asylum seekers, and often endorsed by lobby groups such as Migration Watch. There is also now no shortage of mainstream media commentators, such as Niall Ferguson, Melanie Phillips and Rod Liddle, who write about the dangers of the 'Islamification' of Britain, a message which dovetails with the BNP's dubbing of the local elections as a referendum on the 'creeping Islamification of Britain'. Furthermore, there are a number of centre-Left writers on multiculturalism, such as David Goodhart, Bhikhu Parekh and Trevor Phillips, who speak about the trade-offs between social cohesion and immigration, in ways which suggest a rationality and legitimacy to the 'blame the immigrant' sentiment. This standpoint has reached its apotheosis with the Young Foundation's much-vaunted recent study of social changes in the East End, *The New East End: kinship, race and conflict*, which appears to legitimise racism on the basis that Whites in the East End lost out as the welfare state began to provide for Bengali immigrants. The distance between the nominal Left and the far Right has never seemed shorter. Even while warning of the rise of the BNP in Barking, in the weeks before today's election, Margaret Hodge MP argued that BNP supporters, who blamed immigrants for local housing problems, were not adopting racist thinking. She told the *Telegraph* that Barking and Dagenham had changed from a predominantly White area to somewhere akin to 'Camden or Brixton'. But anger at this shift was 'not down to racism' but due to a 'fear of change'. Apparently, it is now considered inappropriate to say that 'Black people are stealing our homes' is an expression of racism. New strategy At its most effective, campaigning against the far Right has targeted not just far-Right parties but also the wider racism from which they drew support. The racist message was considered as disreputable as the far-Right messenger. But nowadays, there are few pundits or politicians who are prepared to say loud and clear that blaming Britain's problems on immigration is a racist lie. The predominant approach is to seek to 'recognise' the 'legitimate' and 'rational' concerns of far-Right sympathisers. This is a large-scale shift from the situation ten years ago, when it would have been unthinkable for anyone on the Left to endorse a message that held immigration responsible for housing shortages. As long as the underlying assumptions of the far Right's message are allowed to circulate unchallenged across the political spectrum, its rise is likely to continue. Those who oppose far Right political parties will be most likely to reverse their rise if they adopt a more coherent strategy that fights not just the parties themselves but also the environment of 'respectable racism' in which they thrive.