

CHURCHES' RACIAL JUSTICE NETWORK

The racial justice team of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland
(Formerly Churches' Commission for Racial Justice)

RACIAL JUSTICE & THE BALLOT BOX

Exploring a
Christian Response to
Far-Right Political
Parties



To the alarm of many people, including almost all Christian denominations, the British National Party has made gains in local elections in recent years. This paper seeks to help Christians ask important questions about far-right political groups like the BNP and articulate a strong and informed response, based on the Christian belief that all people are created as **one** race, the human race.

Far right politics - why should Christians be concerned?

"On its website, the BNP asserts that Britain's proud history of glorious achievements demonstrates that the British genotype is a valuable one and deserves to be preserved."

While a small number of mixed marriages - or mixed race children - in Britain won't, in themselves, make any difference, if this is encouraged however as it is at present by politicians and the media then inevitably the traditional British genotype will be endangered in the long-term."

(BNP Web site - October 2007)

Most Churches shy away from instructing people on how to vote but are agreed that the racist policies and philosophy of the British National Party are incompatible with Christian faith. Far right political groups, of which the British National Party is the prime example, often make "British-ness" a central motif in their policies, but many Christians believe there is something far more sinister underlying this emphasis.

On its website the BNP sets out to answer what it calls “slurs” made against it by political opponents, in the process revealing plainly racist attitudes.

“Do you believe that blacks are less intelligent than whites?”

It is a fact that every academic study has shown that the average black IQ is 15 points lower than that of whites, but remember that this is a group average and therefore it would be utterly wrong to say that all blacks are less intelligent than all whites.

Why don't you let blacks and Asians into the BNP?

For the same reason the Girl Guides don't allow boys to join. Does that mean they are sexist? Does it mean they hate boys? Of course not, it's just that their aim is to cater for the interests of girls, and similarly the BNP isn't racist, but our purpose is to cater for the interests of the indigenous British population.”

(BNP Website - October 2007)

The great majority of Christians believe such sentiments are directly opposed to the Christian view that all people are made in the image of God, and to the vision of a just community where people of all backgrounds to live together in equality. The BNP protests that it does not promote racial hatred: its words often have the opposite effect.

What do the Churches say?

Many denominations and other Christian leaders have expressed their concern about and their opposition to far-right political parties whose views many would consider to be racist.

“The Methodist Church expects members of the Methodist Church to practice and promote racial justice and inclusion, and reject any political parties that attempt to stir up racial hatred and fear of asylum seekers.”

The Methodist Church

“[This synod] believes that voting for and/or supporting a political party that offers racist policies is incompatible with Christian discipleship.”

The Church of England

“Within Britain we affirm that membership of or support for organizations such as the BNP is incompatible with Christian discipleship.”

The United Reformed Church

“[This Executive] encourages full voting participation in local, national and European elections, but urges people not to vote for candidates who promote, give assent to, or are associated with racist policies.”

The Baptist Union of Great Britain

“All political parties have a responsibility to be clear and unequivocal in their refusal to collude with racism.”

Catholic Bishops Conference of England and Wales

“The BNP may present its election message as ‘Christian’, but as it is based on the divisive and racist agenda inherent to that party, it is clearly out of step with the message of freedom and belonging that is central to the Christian faith.”

African and Caribbean Evangelical Alliance.

“We urge all Christian people to exercise their right to vote and to vote only for candidates whose policies reflect a spirit of inclusive welcome.”

The Church Leaders of West Yorkshire

The full text of these statements and other in similar vein may be found on the relevant denominational web sites and many have been gathered together by the Methodist Church on its political extremism web page.

The tactics of far-right political groups

In the 2006 local elections, councillors promoting racist policies increased their number of seats to over fifty and are now a significant force in at least fourteen local councils. Their vote has increased seventy-five-fold since the year 2000. In Barking and Dagenham the BNP is the second largest party. Churches opposed to this brand of politics have a double challenge: not only does the number of candidates from far-right parties fielded in local, regional and national elections continue to rise, but increasingly there are elected councillors representing those parties. The BNP may try to use their support in certain areas as a platform for winning a parliamentary or London Assembly seat or take control of a local council.

One trend causing great alarm among churches is the tactic of presenting a racist agenda as “Christian.” This has been done explicitly by an organization called “The Christian Council of Great Britain” led by BNP candidate ‘Revd’ Robert West.

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Anthea Cox, Methodist Coordinating Secretary for Public Life and Social Justice responded: *“We are deeply concerned that some people are now appropriating Christian language and symbols for policies that are the very opposite of Christian values.”*
www.methodist.org.uk

The BNP also has strong links with ‘Civil Liberty’, a lawyers’ association, and ‘Solidarity’, a trade union led by a long-time BNP activist. In local campaigns, frequent tactics include focusing on seemingly ‘race-neutral’ issues such as litter, using ‘religion’ as a shorthand for race, targeting predominantly white neighbourhoods that adjoin more mixed communities and generally exploiting dysfunctional local politics.

It has also been noted that the current focus on migration from Eastern Europe now figures strongly in the campaigns of far-right parties, giving a new twist to the racist agenda

What are Christians doing?

BNP electoral success is not one-way traffic. In several places churches have joined forces with other local groups to reverse far-right gains in council elections. A briefing note released by the Church of England in February 2007 makes a number of suggestions. “Be aware of the beliefs and activities of parties that promote racism... Be aware of the way such parties mis-use and distort claims for the word

‘Christian’ in their campaigns and literature... Get advice from those with long experience in dealing with such parties... This is not an area where individuals should work on their own: experience indicates that locally based alliances and strategies are the most effective.”

The Methodist Church and Baptist Union have gone further by issuing Guidelines for local churches who may

be faced with the dilemma of dealing with BNP councillors as the elected representatives in their ward. These Guidelines encourage churches to resist renting church rooms to extremist parties or participating in seemingly innocuous local campaigns alongside far-right councilors, and provide advice for faith schools who face the possibility of those with extremist views becoming school governors.

Questions to wrestle with

Church leaders are unanimous in condemning political views that have racist overtones, but local clergy and members of congregations are in the front-line when it comes to dealing with community issues. The following are some of the questions that churches at a local level may wish to address in order to develop a response to far-right political parties both at election times and also where councillors with a racist agenda have been elected.

- What is the level of support for far-right political groups in your area and what position, if any, do they have on the local council?
- What are the biblical and theological objections to racist political policies?
- How is it possible to oppose racist politics without telling people how to vote?
- How can Christians support a positive and inclusive vision rather than taking a negative stance against views of which they disapprove?
- Should church-sponsored hustings invite far-right candidates to take part?
- Should churches allow BNP councillors to hold surgeries on church premises?
- How should local clergy respond when they find themselves attending functions where candidates or elected members from racist parties may be present?
- What local alliances can churches form to promote unity in the community and oppose racist politics?
- How can local churches play their part in offering positive community leadership to counter the failure of local politics often exploited by extremist parties?
- How can education for racial justice be built into the year-round programme of a local church?

These discussion questions may helpfully be used alongside the Guidelines produced by the Methodist Church and the Baptist Union. (See web links below)

The racial justice team at Churches Together believes that Churches should work together to counter racist political groups and to promote policies that foster an inclusive community.

Useful web links

www.ctbi.org.uk/racial_justice

www.methodist.org.uk - contains background information, suggestions for action and resources for churches. Look for "political extremism" under the A-Z

(find the Guidelines quoted above at www.methodist.org.uk/downloads/pi_extremistparties_guidelines_0407.doc)

www.cofe.anglican.org

www.catholic-ew.org.uk

www.urc.org.uk

www.baptist.org.uk

www.crc-online.org.uk

Political websites

www.christiansinpolitics.co.uk

www.conservatives.com

www.labour.org.uk

www.libdems.org.uk

www.obv.org.uk (Operation Black Vote)

www.bnp.org.uk (British National Party)

<http://www.tuc.org.uk/equality/index.cfm>

Other resources

www.searchlightmagazine.com

This paper is produced by the racial justice team of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland in cooperation with the Barking and Dagenham Episcopal Area of the Anglican Diocese of Chelmsford and the Methodist Church.
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