

The success of the BNP in the European elections reaffirms something is deeply wrong in British politics. We are lurching from one moral crisis to another and our leaders are able only to follow the public's mood, not shape it

Who owns our democracy?



By David Lammy

While D-Day veterans remembered the sacrifices of those who fought fascism, two racists from the British National Party were elected to represent us in Europe. What an appalling way for that generation's grandchildren to honour their memory. It has been a sickening time to be involved with British politics. Buoyed by success, Nick Griffin took to the airwaves, boasting of how he will free the white population from the "racism" it suffers at the hands of an arrogant liberal elite. Less than six months after the United States elected its first black president, Britain is witnessing the rise of a politics of racial grievance. Something is deeply wrong in our democracy.

Some will interpret the BNP gains as a signal for harsher rhetoric in months ahead. As always, the temptation will be to triangulate to the right. Yet this would be a mistake. People are rightly becoming wary of triangulation as an inauthentic way of addressing their concerns. As such, mainstream politicians must resist the urge to play the "immigration card". It is the easy way out and offers no lasting solution. We must recognise that the success of the far right reflects anger at the failure of mainstream politics to address deeply felt grievances of cultural loss and injustice. In many Labour heartlands, people feel disenfranchised and abandoned. There is a profound sense of cultural loss and injustice in many Labour heartlands, and it is no coincidence that the BNP frequently describes itself as Old Labour. Its nationalist socialism represents the politics of class, soured by racial hatred and bitterness.

We must also recognise that the success of the far right reflects wider voter disillusionment with

politics itself. For every person who voted BNP in the European elections, another 29 decided not to vote at all. Britain is in a dark mood. Over the past six months, we have lurching through a series of moral crises – starting with the furore over Jonathan Ross and Russell Brand, followed by public outrage over the case of Baby P, widespread anger over bankers' bonuses, and now outright indignation over the abuse of MPs' expenses. In each case, politicians have been slow to respond to events. They have been able only to follow the public mood, rather than to shape it.

More than this, in each of these cases mechanical reform – changes to systems of governance and accountability – has been necessary but not sufficient. Reforms to children's services, new banking regulations, a new expenses system for MPs, even a new constitution: all are needed, but none is enough. These are moral, ethical, social problems, not just technical difficulties.

And yet, too often, our politics is unable to reflect this. The dangerous drop in voter turnout, the rise of fringe parties, the political gains of the zealots in the BNP: these facts reflect not just a perceived lack of difference between the main parties, but the failure of any party to make a moral and emotional connection with people.

In response to the latest crisis, Gordon Brown is leading the debate on constitutional reform,

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rightly identifying it as unfinished business. How we elect our rulers and how they run their affairs matter enormously to the health of a democracy. The debate we are now having illustrates both how important New Labour's modernising mission was – and how damaging it is that it was never seen through. Similarly, David Cameron has offered his own contribution on behalf of the Conservatives, making an argument about pushing power down to people and communities, expressing sentiments that many progressives share.

The problem of British politics is not simply one of a lack of accountability, however: it is that it has become managerial and unambitious. Politics today has become obsessed with what works, losing sight of what matters. The language of targets, delivery and governance feels so far away from the things that matter in our everyday lives.

In such a technocratic politics, the only response to crisis can be mechanical reform, which is incapable of reflecting big questions back to society itself. Yet questions about how we look after children, how we treat the professionals who try to help us, or what kind of market economy we want, are questions for all of us.

For Labour in particular, we must return to a discussion about fundamental values and beliefs if we are to provide the moral leadership that an ambitious politics demands. A clear vision of the good society is a prerequisite of a more sophisticated and authentic relationship with the public. Only then will we equip ourselves to respond to both voter apathy and the insurgency of parties of the extreme right with more than the usual short-term fix.

This is obviously no easy task, but it is a discussion we must have. So here is a starter for debate: the good society is one not just where we are free and powerful as individuals, but where we recognise that each of us is part of something bigger. The job of Labour is to reflect that idea and give it practical expression. It is our task to build common ground out of our cultural differences.

The big challenges of our age – addressing climate change, regulating financial markets, eradicating poverty, caring for the elderly, improving life chances – are issues of the common good, not simply of personal power. In each of these cases the role of politics is not just to aggregate the choices of millions by counting up the votes, as on *Britain's Got Talent*. Governments must set the rules of the game and ensure they are not broken, putting limits on markets, establishing entitlements to care, setting minimum income levels and maximum carbon emissions.

However, that is simply the beginning of the work needed to build the good society. In addition to ensuring clear rules from the state, politics must also connect with the energy of movements in civil society itself. For the centre left, the ambitious political project involves establishing the new progressive institutions for the 21st century that will bring people together.

Clement Attlee's institutions sought to address social deficits. The state stepped in to provide a safety net and to establish a basic social minimum. We still need to pool risk and provide high-quality universal services. But the institutions of the 21st century must move beyond a deficit model. They must also connect people, on and offline, providing practical ways for people to make a contribution to society.

As a wave of reforms opens Westminster up to much greater scrutiny, we need to apply the same ideas in the private sector. In finance, we need not just more oversight from above, but greater transparency in society to hold companies to account from below.

On the high street, we should recognise that consumerism is empty only because we allow it to be – and arm people with the information they need to make ethical daily choices. At work, we need models of ownership that allow people to work with one another, not just for someone else. In public services, patients and parents need to be brought together to help and advise one another. We are in danger of becoming a society of strangers. There should be opportunities for younger people to contribute and to learn habits of citizenship through a national civic service.

For the elderly, we need to learn from systems of mutual and community support pioneered elsewhere, in countries such as Japan.

The principle behind all these ideas is the same – progressive politics must be about finding new ways to bring people together to create a better society. New Labour's mantra was to help people to help themselves. That can no longer be enough. Progressive politicians must be in the business of helping people to help each other.

People are crying out for a politics they can believe in. Whatever you think of the policies of Ukip or the Green Party, their authenticity and consistency of message are compelling. Mainstream politicians have to understand that. The three main parties have dominated British politics for more than a century, but none of them – least of all Labour – can be complacent. We cannot take our position for granted.

Instead, we must offer a compelling vision that brings people together to answer big questions and encourages each of us to see our own choices as part of something larger. There is no short-term fix to the events of recent weeks or the rise of the BNP. The only answer is the politics of the good society. ●

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