

ACTIVISM IN CONTEMPORARY EXTREME RIGHT PARTIES
THE CASE OF THE BRITISH NATIONAL PARTY (BNP)*

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Whilst the electoral performance of contemporary extreme right parties has generated much interest there are few studies of extreme right party activists. Focusing on the case of the British National Party (BNP) this paper investigates who joins the extreme right and considers the motive for active participation. Our study draws on qualitative life-history interviews with activists and analysis of internally-orientated party literature. Like its electorate we find that the BNP recruits much of its active support from older working class males though we also identify three ‘types’ of activist who are drawn to the party and who follow quite different routes into the extreme right. In terms of the motive for activism, findings highlight the importance of ideological motives and collective incentives, in particular ethnic nationalist beliefs and a desire to defend the native in-group from perceived threats. In conclusion, the paper raises implications for the study of extreme right parties and activism.

In the study of political parties recent years have seen a resurgence of interest in membership and activism. Whether focused, for example, on ordinary party members (e.g. Gallagher & Marsh, 2004; Pedersen et al., 2004), young activists and youth organizations (e.g. Cross & Young, 2008; Hooghe, Stolle & Stouthuysen, 2004), or the impact of electoral results on membership and activity (e.g. Fisher, Denver & Hands, 2006) scholars have responded to earlier calls for much greater attention to be directed toward questions such as why do some citizens become actively involved in parties, what do they do as members and what are their characteristics and beliefs (Seyd & Whiteley, 2004: 355-6). In the British case a series of studies have examined the recruitment patterns, activities and beliefs of members and activists in the political mainstream (Seyd & Whiteley, 1992; Whiteley & Seyd, 2002; Whiteley, Seyd & Richardson, 1994; Whiteley, Seyd & Billingham, 2006), as well as the political engagement of citizens more generally (e.g. Pattie, Seyd & Whiteley, 2003). Much less attention, however, has focused on citizens who reject the mainstream and instead join and actively participate in organizations on the extreme right-wing of the political spectrum.¹ Despite the wider trend noted above, membership and activism constitutes one of the least studied subfields in the pan-European literature on contemporary right-wing extremism (Mudde 2007: 97). Whilst we now know much about who votes for extreme right parties and why some of these parties perform better than others, we know considerably less in terms of who joins and becomes active on behalf of these organizations, how they come to do so and why.² As a result of this lack of research, several important questions remain largely unanswered, for example: what are the social and political backgrounds of extreme right party activists? What are the routes into these organizations? What activities do activists undertake and why do some

citizens pursue a form of participation which has been shown to entail considerable financial and personal costs?³

Focusing on the dominant representative of the extreme right in twenty-first century Britain - the British National Party (BNP) - this paper departs from much of the existing literature by drawing on qualitative life history interviews with activists in order to investigate who becomes active in the party, what are the routes into extreme right activism and what factors drive active participation. The article proceeds as follows: section one provides an overview of recent findings on extreme right party activism; section two discusses data and methods; section three shifts attention to the case study, detailing BNP membership and the party's evolving recruitment strategy; section four presents findings from the life history interviews, focusing in particular on activists' background characteristics, the paths to participation and also considers the motive for activism. In the final section we summarize the main findings and raise implications for the wider literatures.

Right-Wing Extremists in Postwar Europe

Early attempts to theorize support for fascist and right-wing extremist movements stressed the role of authoritarianism, social isolation or status anxiety. Yet these earlier models have since been met with considerable criticism, not least for failing to adequately distinguish the level of commitment under examination (i.e. voters or activists?), focusing disproportionately on the assumed reactive nature of participation (Brustein, 1996), and interpreting support as simply a by-product of psychological abnormality (Blee, 1996; McAdam, 1982; Teske, 1997). Following wider trends in political science more recent studies emphasize the instrumental nature of extreme right party support. In terms of *voters* findings suggest that support for anti-immigrant

parties is not merely an act of protest but is driven more by ideological considerations (Van der Brug et al. 2005). In terms of *activists*, drawing on life history interviews with 150 activists in five West European states Klandermans and Mayer (2006: 7) likewise criticize the earlier tendency to emphasize the marginal, pathological and violent attributes of joiners. Instead they assume from the outset that ‘...participation in RWE [right-wing extremist] organizations is as equally rational as in any other movement or organization’ and that, like participation in other political parties and social movements, activists in extreme right parties have incentives to participate. Their main finding - that activists generally appeared ‘...as normal people, socially integrated, connected in one way or another to mainstream groups and ideas’ - contributes to an emerging consensus that active participation in right-wing extremist groups is more complicated and nuanced than previously assumed (Ibid., p.269; Kaplan & Weinberg, 1998: 2; also Goodwin, 2010).

What motivates extreme right party activism? In explaining the motive for active participation Klandermans and Mayer (2006) adopt a social psychological account, stressing a complex interplay of (i) instrumental, (ii) ideological and (iii) identity-based motives. Though focused narrowly on the extreme right, the incentives for activism that emerge from the qualitative data appear equivalent to the process, ideological and outcome incentives discussed in the wider literature on party activism. Particularly important for activists in the extreme right are ideological motives in the form of ethnic nationalist beliefs; in contrast to extreme right party voters who appear to be driven more by xenophobia, activists in parties such as the *Front National* (FN) in France and *Vlaams Blok* (VB; since renamed *Vlaams Belang*) in Belgium saw active participation as an effective channel through which they could give expression to their deeply held ethnic nationalist beliefs, defend the respective ethnic in-group

from perceived threats posed by immigration and demographic change and obtain collective benefits for the wider ethnic community: 'It is not so much that they are against foreigners, but they feel the urge to defend their stock; they see foreigners as a threat to the integrity of their people and culture' (Klandermans & Mayer, 2006: 271). These motives appear similar in nature to the ideological radicalism and group-based incentives discussed in studies of mainstream party activists (e.g. Seyd & Whiteley 2002: 91-2; Whiteley, Seyd & Billinghamurst, 2006: 76-82). Furthermore, the emphasis on collective incentives and perceived threats to the ethnic in-group is consistent with findings on anti-immigrant hostility, which indicate that perceptions of threat to the wider national community and way of life is the main driver of support for more restrictive immigration policies such as those put on offer to voters by parties on the extreme right-wing (Ivarsflaten, 2005).

Whilst ethnic nationalism 'constitutes the foundation for the development of a vision regarding foreigners' (De Witte, 2006: 147), an important additional incentive for activists on the European extreme right are social norms, with findings revealing the crucial role of family socialization. Whilst some activists converted to right-wing extremism as a consequence of a specific grievance or dissatisfaction with established channels, the majority of interviewees were recruited into the milieu by 'significant others' (Seyd & Whiteley, 2002: 102) having been exposed to traditional, nationalist, authoritarian and hierarchical values prior to membership, thereby effectively being preconditioned to be inclined toward the extreme right. For example, in the Italian case activists' families '...often depicted fascist society as safe and well-ordered' (Milesi et al. 2006: 74), whilst in Flanders activists had frequently been exposed to a family tradition of Flemish nationalism spanning several generations (De Witte 2006: 130-1).

Building on this research we investigate extreme right party activism in Britain, a case not included in the comparative study above. Reflective of the wider cross-national literature on right-wing extremism, studies in Britain have tended to focus more on who votes for parties such as the BNP rather than explore their rank and file activist footsoldiers (see below for a summary).

Data and Methods

Studies of activism in established ‘mainstream’ parties are now routinely based on large scale sample surveys, enabling scholars to compare activists with non-activists and the national population more generally. Whilst desirable this approach is ill-suited for research on right-wing extremist groups that are ‘renowned for refusing to grant outsiders access to their records and personnel’ (Carter 2005: 65-6). As a result, research has tended to be based on small scale qualitative studies or ethnographic research.⁴ Only in a few cases have extreme right parties made membership data available for the purposes of research (e.g. Ivaldi, 1996), or permitted social scientists to undertake a survey among conference delegates (e.g. Baldini & Vignati, 1996; Ignazi & Ysmal 1992; Vignati, 2001). Moreover, when a survey approach has been utilized studies have typically remained confined to the surface of the party in question, resembling little more than ‘hurriedly taken snapshots of a particular extremist group’ (Billig 1978: 93-4; also Fielding, 1982a: 15-16). This study adopts a qualitative approach to the study of extreme right party activism and is guided by the assumption that we can learn much from what activists themselves tell us about their backgrounds, motivations and beliefs (see Teske, 1997). Between May 2005 and April 2007 potential participants were approached through snowballing, a technique which has proven particularly useful in cases where activists are well-networked and

difficult to approach directly (Bernard, 1988: 98), such as those in right-wing extremist groups (e.g. Blee, 1996). Activists' contact details were obtained from two sources: firstly, regional and local party organizers were approached through the BNP website; secondly, the party's elected local councillors were approached through the website of individual councils. Though activists were initially suspicious and inquisitive about the aims of the research most agreed to participate and also provide details of fellow activists or forward information about the study. As similarly found in previous research, and contrary to assumptions in the existing literature, the task of gaining access was relatively straightforward, recalling Fielding's (1982b: 83) observation that '...far too many negative noises about research amongst particular groups represent the reluctance of the researcher rather than the real difficulty of entry'.

The two sources above yielded an initial contact list of 24 potential activists, comprised mostly of elected councillors and organizers. Letters on university stationery were sent in May 2005 and produced a response rate of 16 per cent (i.e. four responses - three via e-mail and one via telephone). Those activists not responding were contacted one week later via e-mail or telephone, producing an additional four interviews. Over the ensuing 23 months snowball chains were continually developed whilst earlier interviewees were revisited to undertake repeat interviews which were held either weeks, months or in some cases over one year after initial contact. Whilst sensitive topics by their nature necessitate a greater level of involvement from the researcher in order to establish an adequate level of trust and rapport (Bulmer, 1984: 111; Lee, 1993), these additional interviews with individual activists (in some cases on up to four separate occasions) also allow for a much richer

perspective and avoid the ‘snapshot approach’ that has traditionally weakened studies of right-wing extremist groups (Billig 1978: 94-5; also Mishler 1986: 24-5).

In order to minimize the potential risk of activists influencing the sample a number of strategies were employed. First, rather than focus only on a single branch or region interviews were held with activists throughout England and Wales, thereby providing broader perspective and reducing the likelihood of focusing only on one ‘type’ of activist. Interviewees are located in areas where the BNP has performed well (for example Barking and Dagenham, Burnley and Epping Forest) and also areas that are not particularly renowned for extreme right activity (for example Maidenhead). Second, rather than focus only on elites a concerted effort was made to interview activists at all levels of the organization, from the BNP Chairman to the rank and file activist. As detailed in Table 1, interviewees include the party leader, organizers at the national, regional and local level, elected BNP councillors, local branch activists and former activists. Overall the study draws on a sample of 24 activists and qualitative data gathered in 45 life-history interviews. Albeit small our sample is comparable in size to similar studies elsewhere in Europe.⁵

Insert Table 1 about here

In order to improve the comparability of the research the interview guide was based on the scheme devised by Klandermans and Mayer (2006: 57) and which is rooted in the life history approach to interviewing. The life history method holds the potential to reveal activists own interpretation of key events, enable the researcher to examine

how interviewees make sense of the world around them and, as a result of the emphasis on individual experience, minimizes the likelihood of interviewees merely ‘parroting’ party propaganda (Blee & Taylor, 2002: 104). It is most likely for this reason that the life history approach has proven particularly effective in research on adherents to the extremist fringe (e.g. Fangen 1999). Finally, to investigate the party’s approach to activist recruitment and retention three long interviews were held with the BNP Chairman and qualitative analysis of internally-directed literature such as membership bulletins was undertaken (see below). In this case the BNP website and monthly newspaper were avoided in favour of its subscription magazine (*Identity*) that is geared principally toward members and activists.⁶

BNP Membership and Activism

The task of gathering accurate membership data is problematic in respect to most political parties (e.g. Billordo, 2003) yet it is especially so in the case of right-wing extremist parties which, as a result of their stigmatization in wider society, are especially likely to claim an inflated membership and activist base in an attempt to acquire ‘legitimation’ (Mair & van Biezen, 2001: 7). To investigate BNP membership we draw on self-reported figures which are set against the wider secondary literature and internal membership bulletins distributed by the leadership to organizers and activists.⁷ In contrast to publicly available front-stage literature internally-directed sources allow for a more thorough examination of parties’ internal development (Mudde, 2000: 21). Though subject to limitations, implicit in this combined approach is the view adopted by Mair and van Biezen (2001: 8); whilst data is better than no data at all it should nonetheless be ‘treated with a pinch of salt’.

BNP Membership, 1982-1999

Whilst the BNP was established in 1982 the party holds its ideological and organizational roots in the earlier National Front (NF) that had been founded in 1967 and which mobilized a significant level of support in 1970s Britain. Continuity with the NF was reflected in the BNP's first major electoral outing, the general election of 1983; at least two fifths of the BNP's 54 parliamentary candidates had stood on behalf of the NF in the previous general election of 1979 (Goodwin 2010). In areas such as Bristol, Carmarthen and Leicester, some of the earliest BNP branches were former NF units that had switched allegiance whilst the BNP's first active units in the historic extreme right strongholds of Hackney and Tower Hamlets in London attracted significant numbers of ex-members of the British Movement (BM).⁸ On its formation the BNP brought together approximately 1,200 followers of the party's inaugural Chairman John Tyndall who had coalesced around the New National Front (NNF 1980-82), and who were joined by small numbers of disaffected members of other right-wing extremist groups (Copsey, 1996: 120). As a result the BNP's early approach to recruitment deviated little from its parent party the NF; the party framed membership in militaristic terms and imposed paramilitary-style discipline on its activist base (Husbands 1988: 69). Like the NF, recruitment efforts were directed principally toward alienated working class youths in urban districts; as the BNP Chairman stated in 1990, it was the 'young skinhead' who typified the 'spirit' of the party.⁹ During its early years the BNP also sought to reach out to the Conservative fringe, as reflected in revelations of links between the BNP, the right-wing Monday Club and the Federation of Conservative Students (FCS).¹⁰

During its first two decades, and much like its share of the vote, the party's membership base remained miniscule. At least until the twenty-first century the leadership refused to commit the party unequivocally to electoral politics, adhering instead to the NF tactic of using confrontational street-based rallies to recruit new followers and attract publicity. The election of the BNP's first local councillor in Tower Hamlets in 1993 almost certainly triggered an influx of new recruits whilst in the same period in areas such as Croydon and the West Country the party benefitted from an influx of ex-NF activists. However, internecine rivalry with remnants of the old NF and the extra-parliamentary group Combat 18 continued to hamper activist recruitment. In addition, internally the party remained weak and ill-equipped to recruit and retain new joiners. For example, prior to 1993 the party had no telephone line through which prospective new recruits could make enquiries (and then relied only on one line).¹¹ In the late 1980s the party also operated without a regular newspaper and when periodic publications began to appear in the early 1990s it is estimated that these attracted little more than 500 subscribers whilst membership remained confined to 1,000 (Copsey, 1996, 122-4). At least until the late 1990s it seems unlikely that the party attracted more than 2,000 members whilst few of these card-carrying members appeared active (for example a major BNP conference in 1994 attracted only 100 activists).¹² Activists arrived either from extreme right circles or were disaffected Conservatives. In terms of the former, in 1997-8 a former branch of the National Democrats (ND) switched en masse to the BNP and whilst merger talks with the NF failed, Frontists were assured that they would be 'warmly welcomed in the BNP and that their talents would be recognised and rewarded'.¹³ Whilst small in number membership also appeared highly volatile; as one commentator noted in respect to the 1970s NF, membership had been 'rather like a bath with both taps running and the

plughole empty. Members pour in and pour out' (Walker, 1977: 9). In the period 1982-1999 the BNP similarly devoted little energy to activist retention. Whilst the leadership conceded it had failed to put on regular events for activists one organizer would later recall that as many activists exited the party due to exhaustion, dissatisfaction or burnout as the numbers gained via recruitment campaigns.¹⁴

From Skinheads to Sensible Types: 1999-2009

More recent years have seen a significant growth in BNP membership (see Figure 1). Following the election of Cambridge-graduate Nick Griffin as BNP chairman in 1999 the party broke with tradition and detailed its membership figures, claiming to have 1,350 members in 1999, 2,173 in 2001 and 3,487 in 2002 (Goodwin, 2010). Some hypothesized that new recruits arrived either from the politically uncommitted or were ex-Conservatives on the fringe of the party who had been purged by Iain Duncan Smith (Eatwell, 2004). Whilst the party's failure to elect a Member of the European Parliament in 2004 likely contributed to a fall in membership, high-profile gains in the local elections in 2006 (most noticeably in Barking and Dagenham where 11 of the 13 BNP candidates were elected) combined with media coverage of Nick Griffin's trial for incitement to racial hatred led to a surge in membership to approximately 10,000. The leakage of the party's membership list in November 2008 by renegade activists (confirmed as genuine by the party) placed membership at approximately 12,000.

Insert Figure 1 about here

When viewed through a comparative lens the BNP's membership is unquestionably small. In recent years the Liberal Democrats have claimed a membership of 90,000 (Seyd & Whiteley, 2004: 357), whilst estimates of the membership of extreme right parties such as the French *Front National* have centred on 40,000 (Klandermans & Mayer, 2006: 47). Yet it is important not to overlook recent attempts by the post-1999 BNP to provide a range of incentives designed to encourage followers to actively participate and strengthen the commitment of its existing activist cadre.

Firstly, from 1999 onward the BNP has embarked upon a strategy of 'modernization' that has seen the party downplay overt fascist nostalgia and embrace vote-seeking goals. Through its exoteric ideological appeals Griffin's BNP has sought to replace the traditional emphasis on crude biological racism and virulent anti-Semitism with a discourse based upon the ethno-pluralist doctrine or new 'cultural racism' (Rydgren, 2005). The earlier revolutionary critique of liberal parliamentary democracy has similarly been toned down in favour of anti-establishment (but not overtly anti-democratic) populism. Of particular significance has been the party's exoteric abandonment of the previously core policy of the compulsory repatriation of immigrants and the adoption of a revised voluntary repatriation policy based on financial incentives for returning immigrants (influenced by the French FN model). Whilst principally geared toward vote-seeking goals the strategy of modernization forms part of a broader aim to make support for the BNP more socially acceptable. For example, the leadership has sought to improve the respectability of the party's rank and file activist base, criticizing the tendency to recruit only 'closet Nazis' and instead stressing the need to recruit 'sensible and good quality types'.¹⁵ One article urges supporters to compare a picture of young skinheads and the party founder in Nazi regalia with a picture of newly-elected BNP local councillors: 'That is how

much the BNP has changed. That is the new face of our party. That is our future. The rest is history'.¹⁶

Secondly, from 2002 onward electoral gains in some local areas has enabled the BNP to present itself as a credible political alternative. In the period 1992-2005 the number of citizens voting BNP in general elections increased sharply from 7,000 to almost 200,000. Whilst in the general election of 2005 the party only polled 0.7 per cent of votes case, the 118 BNP candidates averaged 4.3 per cent in the seats they contested and in 31 constituencies surpassed the five per cent threshold required to retain their deposit (of the 33 BNP candidates who stood in 2001 only seven retained their deposit). In a further three constituencies BNP candidates polled over 10 per cent of the vote, most noticeably in Barking where they received almost 17 per cent, the highest level of support for an extreme right parliamentary candidate in British history. Whilst it is important not to overstate the party's growth it should also be noted that there appears a sizeable reservoir of latent support in contemporary Britain for policies associated with the BNP (see Ford 2010; John & Margetts, 2009). Aside from national contests the BNP has focused much of its effort on local elections where its campaigning has shifted from confrontational rallies toward community-based activism. Through its 'ladder strategy' the party seeks to achieve a wider breakthrough by contesting less costly local elections and tailoring its message around local issues. Whilst in 2000 the party fielded only 17 candidates across 12 local authorities in 2007 over 700 BNP candidates stood across 148 local authorities (see Table 2). There are currently over 50 elected local BNP councillors whilst in May 2008 the party also acquired one seat on the Greater London Assembly (GLA). In these local arenas the party aims to mobilize support by presenting itself as a credible alternative and embellishing perceptions of ethnic threat and competition, as in

Barking and Dagenham in 2006 where the BNP campaign focused on social housing, linked an alleged increase in the number of HIV cases in the area to an influx of minority ethnic groups and pledged to introduce a 'sons and daughters' housing scheme that would benefit native (white) residents. Importantly the party has been careful to wrap its campaigns in distinct local traditions, for example making frequent references to a distinct 'East End' identity in outer-east London areas.

Insert Table 2 about here

Thirdly, the post-1999 BNP places much heavier emphasis on initiatives designed to recruit and retain active followers. Under Griffin, the party maintains more regular membership bulletins and publications, has experimented with personal recruitment techniques and invests heavily in its Internet operation which the leadership interprets as being the main point of contact for potential new joiners.¹⁷ Attempts have also been made to promote intra-party democracy, such as the establishment of an advisory council and moves toward a voting membership scheme designed to reward long-term commitment and activism. Inspired by similar parties elsewhere the party has sought to develop what it terms a 'cultural offensive', attempting to overcome the traditionally transient nature of activism by inculcating activists in a plethora of periphery organizations, associations and events that include an annual party festival, a youth and student organization, a trade union, an association for ex-servicemen, a dining club and a record label (named Great White Records), all of which stand alongside a stronger emphasis on the training of activists and organizers (e.g. in 2006 over 200 party followers attended the party's annual summer school to receive instruction in fundraising, campaigning and ideology).¹⁸ In making these changes the

post-1999 BNP has sought to provide incentives for followers to become active, many of which were not offered by either the pre-1999 BNP or old NF. Drawing on the qualitative interviews, in the next section we shift our attention onto the activists.

The Activists: Who are they?

Earlier individual level research on extreme right voting in 1970s Britain suggested that the NF polled strongest among young, skilled working class males in urban districts, most notably parts of Greater London and the West Midlands. Highlighting the prominence of skilled manual workers Harrop et al. (1980: 275-6) subscribed to an interpretation based on ethnic competition theories, suggesting that the NF attracted followers ‘where competition between indigenous and immigrant populations for scarce and valuable resources is felt most acutely’. Focusing on areas of NF sympathy, Husbands (1983) found that strong sympathy had a more even age distribution, was also prevalent among unskilled workers and stressed the important role of local cultural traditions in rendering working class communities in some areas particularly susceptible to perceptions of ethnic competition and threat (Husbands, 1983). As others summarize, ecological analyses similarly indicate that it was the economically marginal and culturally ‘threatened’ member of the white working class who felt most attracted to the NF in 1970s Britain (Kitschelt, 1995: 255).

More recent aggregate-level research on the BNP’s social bases of support has produced similar findings: as in earlier years support for the party appears to stem not from the most deprived groups but skilled and semi-skilled workers who perceive the local neighbourhood and collective ethnic in-group as under threat from immigration and demographic change (Cruddas et al., 2005; John et al., 2006). Research by

Bowyer (2008) indicates that at the level of wards support for the BNP is concentrated in ‘white enclaves’ within ethnically diverse districts and where local housing markets are under strain. Based on individual level data others find that the BNP polls strongest among less educated, skilled working class men but also that support for the extreme right in twenty-first century Britain – as compared to the 1970s NF – appears more prevalent among older age groups, unskilled workers and in Northern districts (Goodwin et al., 2010).

In terms of *active* support our findings are broadly consistent with the picture presented above: the contemporary BNP recruits much of its active support from among working class males. The male bias (three quarters of interviewees were male) is consistent with findings on BNP voters (Goodwin et al. 2010), as well as extreme right supporters in Europe more generally (e.g. Lubbers et al. 2002). Yet whilst men appear more likely to offer their active support to the BNP each of the females interviewed occupied senior positions within the party, a finding that does not appear unique to the British case (e.g. see Mudde, 2007: 97-100). In terms of the age profile of activists we find a noticeable bias toward older age groups with over half of the interviewees aged 36-55 years old. This is consistent with research on BNP voters, with one possible explanation being that older cohorts came of political age during the 1960s and 1970s, a period that was characterized by Powellism, the first electorally relevant extreme right party in postwar Britain (the NF) and intense political debate over issues of race and immigration. In contrast to younger cohorts who arrived after these events and who hold more tolerant attitudes, these older age groups who have some experience of a more ethnically homogenous Britain express significantly higher levels of racial prejudice (Ford, 2008) and are thus more likely to respond to the exclusionary appeals of the BNP.

The qualitative interviews and short questionnaire that followed provide only limited insight into the socio-economic status of BNP activists.¹⁹ It is worth noting, however, that activists generally appeared quite diverse; over half of all respondents to the questionnaire were in full-time employment, only one was unemployed and the remainder either worked part-time, were in full-time education or had fully retired. The majority of interviewees owned their own property (or were on their way to doing so) and whilst most had not pursued education beyond secondary school several activists had returned to education later in life (in one case completing a PhD at the University of Cambridge). Whilst it is difficult to obtain a clear picture of activists' socio-economic profile, when asked about their social and political backgrounds the vast majority of interviewees affiliated both themselves and their families strongly with the working class. Activists typically described their family background as 'working class Labour', 'staunch Labour' or as supportive of 'old Labour'. As reflected in the extract below and consistent with a wider survey of BNP supporters (Goodwin et al. 2010), the majority of activists in the sample could be described as 'traditional' supporters of the Labour Party:

My family particularly, and myself, voted predominantly Labour, the *old* Labour I might add. One of the things that I feel people have missed out on is that ... they didn't see this word 'new' in front of the title and they didn't question 'new' (regional organizer).

The interviews reveal that most activists were raised and socialized in areas that were either currently or had historically been dominated by the Labour Party. Reflective of most, one interviewee explained how the local town '...had always been a Labour

town, where everybody voted Labour'. Though our snowballing approach imposes limitations it should be noted that during the fieldwork stage most activists were located in what appeared to be 'close knit' working class communities that were struggling with the onset of post-industrialism. Whilst further research is required, it should also be noted that similar to findings produced elsewhere (e.g. De Witte, 2006: 149) activists generally did not appear isolated in their social arenas; almost half of respondents to the questionnaire detailed involvement in organizations such as the NSPCC, Freemasons and local residents associations whilst during the fieldwork stage activists seemed well-integrated into local community 'life' (e.g. some owned local businesses or volunteered in local charity shops). In the next section attention turns to the process of participation.

Three Pathways into Activism

Based on the qualitative interviews we identify three pathways to participation in the extreme right and present a typology of activists that differentiates between longer-term *old guard* activists, the *new recruits*, and *political wanderers*. Given that our sample size imposes limitations, in addition we undertake analysis of internal party membership bulletins and literature to further substantiate the typology.

Firstly, for old guard activists participation in the contemporary BNP marks the continuation of a much longer involvement with the extreme right milieu. Having typically passed through a myriad of alternative extreme right organizations prior to membership old guard activists follow an *internal* recruitment path (Ignazi & Ysmal, 1992). Members of the old guard provide ideological and organizational continuity with the BNP's predecessors, though in particular the NF and have been socialized in the underlying ideological tradition of racial nationalism which, in contrast to the

more diverse ideological currents that underpin new radical right parties such as the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ) and French FN, combines biological racism, virulent and conspiratorial anti-Semitism, militant neo-Nazism and a revolutionary critique of the liberal parliamentary system (Thurlow, 1987). One illustrative example is the editor of the BNP magazine who is able to trace his involvement to the experience of reading a pamphlet by Oswald Mosley in the 1950s. The activist subsequently passed through an ‘alphabet soup’ of overtly fascist and right-wing extremist groups, including Mosley’s postwar Union Movement (UM), an earlier incarnation of the BNP in the 1960s and the 1970s NF.²⁰ Whilst the post-1999 BNP leadership of Nick Griffin (also an ex-NF activist) has sought to distance itself from the (now deceased) party founder John Tyndall, old guard activists have been rewarded with senior positions in the contemporary BNP, thereby sustaining the underlying tradition of racial nationalism. As Griffin wrote in 2006, revolutionary political change must be based on ‘coalitions of interest around an ideological hardcore which gives overall direction’.²¹ As noted above, many of the earliest and most active BNP branches were formerly units of the NF or had attracted significant numbers of activists from alternative extremist groups such as British Movement (BM). In this respect, the old guard activists constitute the remnants of a particular tradition within British politics that can be traced backward to the 1970s NF if not further.

Unlike the activist old guard, prior to joining the BNP the new recruits possess little or no experience in the political arena. Reflective of this faction is the following statement made by one new recruit: ‘I never talked politics until I got involved with the BNP’. As a result of their inexperience new recruits appear to have little knowledge of the party’s history or underlying ideology and in this respect are

equivalent to new joiners in the French FN who also appeared apolitical before turning toward the extreme right (Lafont, 2006: 110):

But if you ask me how much did I know about it, I didn't know anything about it. I just knew there was this party ... If you'd asked me who the leader was I probably wouldn't have been able to tell you ... in any case it would just have been names ... No, I had no detailed knowledge of what I was joining (local organizer).

Based on the qualitative interviews new recruits joined and became active in the BNP in increasing numbers from the late 1990s onward, a period characterized by growing electoral support for the extreme right. Whilst members of the old guard appeared driven primarily by ideological commitment our findings indicate that for new recruits instrumental motives and a perception of the BNP's rising electoral credibility are of greater importance (see below). It is also worth noting that in the case of four new recruits' prior employment in the armed services prohibited any political involvement, suggesting that as in previous years the extreme right continues to serve as a reservoir for significant numbers of ex-servicemen, a group that may be more inclined toward authoritarian positions (e.g. Billig, 1978: 260).

In contrast to new recruits, political wanderers have prior political experience but unlike members of the old guard this activism took place in organizations outside of the extreme right-wing. Political wanderers typically join the BNP later in life and following a sense of dissatisfaction with their previous forays into political activity. These activists appear equivalent to the wanderers described by Linden and Klandermans (2006: 180-1) who arrive at the extreme right following a 'ramble

through the political landscape in search of a political home'. Whilst our findings suggest that new recruits enter politics suddenly and following years of general disinterest, wanderers are able to detail a history of activism, thereby bringing to the party much needed experience and skills. Former Conservative Party activists and those affiliated with Eurosceptic groups appear particularly prominent among this group, suggesting that as in earlier years the contemporary extreme right continues to appeal to those on the fringes of the centre-right (e.g. Nugent, 1980: 216-7):

Activity itself would have been Jimmy Goldsmith and the Referendum Party ... I got quite heavily involved in that ... that was what actually sprung it into action. After Jimmy Goldsmith ... I got involved with UKIP [UK Independence Party], and I stood for UKIP in the 2001 General Election (local organizer).²²

As highlighted by these different paths to membership, similar to findings elsewhere in Western Europe the BNP has not 'emerged from nothing' but rather represents a combination of new and old elements having recruited activists from across the political spectrum and among the previously uncommitted (Klandermans & Mayer, 2006: 270). Yet in contrast to findings elsewhere our study suggests that activists in the British case differ from their continental counterparts in two respects. Firstly, social norms and in particular family socialization does not occupy a central role in activists' pathways toward participation. Whilst the majority of activists drew attention to their working class background they also frequently described their parents, for example, as being '...not in the slightest involved in politics', as 'apolitical' or as having 'no political allegiances or affiliations'. Linked to this finding is the second observation that most interviewees are self-starters in that they directly approached the BNP themselves, whether via local branch organizers or the party

website. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the latter appears to occupy a particularly important role in the trajectories of new recruits who often identified the website as a tool through which the party and expectations of membership could be explored:

I was absolutely amazed. I read all the news articles on there. I just kept on reading them for hours ... just reading these articles trying to find something I disagreed with and I couldn't find anything ... I just read all their stuff on the website and then just said, 'right, well I'll join' (local activist).

One possible explanation for these findings and which is consistent with research elsewhere concerns the historic failure of the British extreme right and its narrow ideological tradition of racial nationalism. In contrast, for example, to Flanders, France and Italy - cases where parties on the extreme right have built upon a rich tradition of mobilization, have coalesced around more diverse ideological currents and where activists were often introduced to the movement via a family tradition of ethnic nationalism and/or sympathies for historic fascism - the British case appears more equivalent to a case such as the Netherlands where the marginalization of right-wing extremism has similarly resulted in activism appearing much less likely to stem from family socialization and personal networks (see Klandermans & Mayer, 2006).

Ethnic Competition and the Motive for Activism

Turning to the motive for activism and drawing on the qualitative interviews, our findings indicate that ideological motives in the form of ethnic nationalist beliefs, corresponding in-group favouritism and perceptions of threat to the native in-group are an important driver of active participation in the contemporary extreme right. This

is consistent with findings on extreme right party activism elsewhere in Europe, which similarly suggest that active followers are motivated not by self-interested concerns over material resources but rather a desire to express their ethnic nationalist beliefs and to defend the ethnic in-group and wider national community - its history, language, culture and territory - from perceived threats posed by immigration, minority ethnic groups and demographic change (De Witte, 2006: 147; Klandermans & Mayer, 2006: 271-2).

In the British case an overwhelming majority of BNP activists traced their decision to become active to the perception that the very survival of the native in-group is threatened by immigration, minority ethnic groups (though in particular Muslims) and more general demographic change. Yet whilst activists in France, Germany and Italy linked their ethnic nationalist beliefs to the nation and in Flanders to their specific region, in our study interviewees frequently traced the decision to join and become active to a desire to respond to perceived threats to the collective group's resources in the immediate locality. Reflective of most is one activist who, when asked what initially brought him to political activity, explains how he never experienced '...a blinding road to Damascus revelation where everything fell into place' but rather describes '...becoming acutely aware of the discrepancies in the distribution of resources'. Others similarly describe '...being spurred on to do something because of what I saw happening on my own door-step', whilst one activist traces his involvement to concern over the onset and impact of demographic change in the local neighbourhood: 'It just wasn't the Keighley we knew. It had become a totally different place we were living in from previously'. Our findings point toward the importance of collective incentives, suggesting that the initial motive for joining and becoming active centres on a perception that designated ethnic out-groups pose a

threat to the collective resources of the in-group and a corresponding desire to defend the latter and their resources from such 'threats'. In this respect, whilst we observe important changes within the BNP's grassroots activist base it appears that the party is recruiting support along similar lines to the 1970s National Front, which similarly benefitted from locally-directed anxieties over labour and housing markets (Husbands 1983: 141). For example, in our study each of the six BNP activists interviewed in Pennine Lancashire in Northern England made specific reference to the decline of the textile industry, a concern that similarly appears to have been an important driving factor for BNP voters in the area (Rhodes, 2006). Asked what initially brought them toward the BNP other activists similarly explain:

They're getting post-offices, shops, take-aways ... everything they need so they don't need us. They're living off themselves aren't they? Their own people ... The Government's way of dealing with deprived areas is by giving the biggest regeneration grants to the poorest areas. Well they're getting it every time. They're winning hands down every time. We haven't got a chance ... So they're getting their houses done up...new windows, new doors, new kitchens ... they're making people angry (local organizer).

They [mainstream politicians] don't know what it's like to live cheek by jowl with a Polish person, a Lithuanian person, an African person and then fight for a job (local activist).

The motivational accounts of activists often centred on local and disparate concerns, for example the alleged prioritization of local wards with large Muslim communities when allocating regeneration funding, the closure of local secondary schools,

increased council tax, the opening of drug rehabilitation centres in nearby neighbourhoods and the claim that councillors intend to increase the cost of school uniforms. As one activist explained; ‘It was little things like that which were making me look in the first place for an alternative; a party that would actually stand up and address the issues’. In some cases, the turn toward the extreme right appears to have been driven more by self-interested and instrumental reasons, as in the case of one activist who frames her initial involvement as an attempt to prevent local Asian businessmen from opening a shop that would directly compete with her own business. Yet on the whole, perceptions of interethnic threat and competition are not restricted to group-based concerns over resources but encompass a strong cultural dimension. Whilst stressing the perceived detrimental impact of immigrants and minority ethnic groups on local labour and housing markets, activists also frequently expressed concerns that were more symbolic in nature and which appear to stem from a sense of anxiety over perceived threats to the national community, culture and way of life. The incentive to defend and take action on behalf of the native in-group and the nation more generally from perceived threats highlights the importance of collective rather than selective incentives in terms of what drives active participation. Activists stressed their concern over the ‘...taking away of traditions’, the ‘erosion’ of British culture and highlighted their objection to ‘people coming over and trying to force their culture on me’. Similarly, as one local organizer explains: ‘I mean, you’ve got a lot of ... I’d not say *outsiders*, but a lot of immigration coming in and people are worried about their own culture being destroyed ... I’m not saying they’re bad people, but we should preserve our own culture.’ This is consistent with findings on anti-immigrant sentiment in Britain more generally, which suggests that hostile attitudes toward immigrants and minority groups are driven not by personal self-interest but

rather concern over the collective group and a desire ‘to reduce immigration to Britain because they fear that it threatens the values and way of life of the society, because they worry about the economic conditions of their fellow native Britons and because they fear for the effects of crime on British society’ (McLaren & Johnson, 2007: 725).

Of particular concern for activists is the perceived threat posed by Islam and the presence of Muslims, a group which is frequently linked to acts of criminality (often in the immediate local area). Muslims and the religion of Islam are frequently portrayed as posing a specific threat and as being unable to conform to wider ‘British’ values and society, indicating that the BNP’s embrace of anti-Islamic nativism may be exerting an effect in some areas. Whilst our sample is small, we can draw confidence from findings elsewhere in Europe which similarly suggest that an important driver of active participation in extreme right parties is a desire to defend the ethnic in-group from the specific threat posed by migrants from Islamic states (De Witte, 2006), and also findings on extreme right voting which find a positive relationship between high levels of support and the presence of Muslim communities (Coffé et al. 2007; Ford & Goodwin, 2009).

Whilst a perception that the existence of their fellow white Britons is under threat from immigration and minority ethnic groups appears central to their initial motivation interviewees also stressed the inefficacy of established mainstream parties. The latter are often described as ‘not strong enough’, ‘running scared’ and as ‘not wanting to deal with the problem’. This anti-establishment sentiment was frequently directed toward Labour, particularly in areas with a long history of Labour dominance, as one activist in a deindustrializing Northern town explained: ‘I didn’t think that in this town in particular people were getting a fair deal. Labour had been in power in this town for as long as anybody can remember.’ Another activist similarly

refers to the arrival of ‘New’ Labour as the moment ‘...when working hard for the working classes went out of the window’.

Whilst extreme right parties in Britain have traditionally lacked electoral relevance, the qualitative interviews reveal that for a majority of activists an important factor driving the decision to join and become active on behalf of the BNP was a sense that the party is able to enact change in the local community and wider society. Confronted with threats both to themselves and the native in-group, activists interpret participation as an opportunity to ‘do something’; to defend the neighbourhood or nation against perceived threats and the inefficacy of mainstream political parties. Particularly in respect to new joiners there is a clear sense that the BNP has a credible expectation of success, with the election of a BNP local councillor or strong electoral performance often cited as an important ‘legitimizing event’:

I can remember [BNP candidate] being elected over in Halifax. It was following his election ... that was the first thing that actually drew my eye to the distinction between the BNP and the National Front ... That’s what made me think, ‘oh there’s some credibility there if they got a councillor elected’ ... that’s what really got the ball rolling (local organizer).

Now I’d had nothing to do with them up until then [election victory] ... I thought, ‘well if these people, the British National Party, instead of being agitators on the outside were now looking like as though they actually wanted to *do* something, something important for the town’ ... So I offered my services to them (local activist).

Our findings indicate that electoral gains by the party publicize to potential activists a credible course of action and an opportunity to enact the desired change. As found in

the case of new joiners in the French FN (Lafont, 2006), the findings suggest that to a certain extent the recruitment of new joiners beyond the longer-term activist old guard appears contingent on the party's ability to cultivate an image of electoral credibility in local arenas. Whilst ideological radicalism and collective incentives in the form of wanting to defend the native in-group from perceived threats appears as the major motive for participation, an additional important incentive – in particular for more recent joiners – is a belief that activism on behalf of the BNP can make a difference. As previously hypothesized, an improved image of extreme right party legitimacy appears to increase feelings of efficacy by making citizens feel less excluded from decision-making channels and more able to influence public policy (Eatwell, 2003):

What shook me out of my slumbers as it were was the May 2003 local council election when the BNP did rather well, they came within 100 votes of success in a number of wards including the one that I happened to be in ... when I saw they'd actually come that close I then thought 'well maybe this party has got a future and it's not just a wasted vote' (local organizer).

Discussion

The electoral resurgence of right-wing extremism over the past three decades has attracted considerable attention. Right-wing extremist parties such as the BNP rely heavily on their activist base to mobilize support and raise finance yet there have been few studies of active participation in these organizations. Compared with activists in the political mainstream, we know little in terms of who joins and becomes active in the contemporary extreme right, how they do so and why, what activities they undertake and what are their political beliefs.

Whilst our sample is subject to some limitations the life-history qualitative approach provides important insight into the seldom addressed questions above. Like its electorate, our findings suggest that the contemporary BNP recruits much of its active support from older, working class males whilst youths, women and citizens in high status occupations appear much less likely to become footsoldiers on the extremist fringe. Based on these findings, it appears that the BNP is recruiting activists from among those groups that constitute the more racially prejudiced ‘pools of hostility’ that remain in contemporary British society (Ford, 2008: 632).

Yet the post-1999 BNP has also embarked on a strategy of ‘modernization’, a process of change that is reflected in its evolving grassroots activist base. In contrast to the party’s early years our findings suggest that the BNP is no longer merely a bastion of right-wing extremists and disillusioned working class youths but is recruiting active support from across the political spectrum. Within the party we identify three ‘types’ of activist who follow quite different routes into the extreme right: whilst the longer-term activist old guard ensure the continual evolution of racial nationalist ideology, wanderers and new recruits differ markedly in terms of their political background, often possessing little or no prior affiliation with right-wing extremism. Whilst our sample is small we can draw confidence from findings elsewhere, which suggest that these prototypes have broader generalizeability within the extreme right party family (Klandermans & Mayer, 2006; Linden & Klandermans, 2006). Within the BNP the arrival of previously unaffiliated new joiners represents a challenge for the leadership who have warned of the ‘danger of being “swamped” by an ideologically incoherent wave of naïve new recruits.’²³ Whilst the arrival of a new layer of activists and rise in membership are indicative of the effectiveness of the BNP’s attempt to broaden its appeal beyond the skinhead fringe, in 2007 a significant

number of activists exited the party out of protest at the continued absence of intra-party democracy and professionalism, suggesting that much like its predecessors the party remains weakened by a tendency for internal factionalism and the fact that it holds its roots in the extremist tradition of racial nationalist ideology (see Art, 2008).

What initially motivates some citizens to participate actively in the BNP? Findings on extreme right support in the British case have tended to recruit ethnic competition theories, stressing the role of perceptions of ethnic threat to group resources as the main driver of exclusionistic attitudes and behaviour. Whilst racial prejudice in contemporary Britain appears to be in decline (Ford, 2008), a recent rise in anti-immigrant sentiment is traced to more symbolic concerns over perceived threats to the collective in-group and way of life (McLaren & Johnson, 2007). The BNP activists interviewed express similar concerns, perceiving the survival of their fellow white Britons as threatened by immigration, minority ethnic groups and in particular Muslims who are portrayed as posing a distinct cultural threat to the national community and 'British' values. These group-based concerns and collective incentives for activism are tied closely to the immediate locality where resources are likely to be especially scarce and anxieties over intergroup competition and threat are sharpened. In this respect our findings point toward the conclusion that the modern day BNP is the latest recipient of much longer sympathies within some working class communities for exclusionistic forms of mobilization that stem not only from group-based concerns over jobs and housing but more symbolic concerns over the national community, culture and way of life (see Husbands, 1983). Therefore, our findings are supportive of calls for much greater attention to be devoted to the cultural factors that drive support for 'anti-immigrant' movements (Van der Brug & Fennema, 2007). In addition, the emphasis on BNP electoral gains in local arenas indicates that much like

activists in parties such as the Liberals (Whiteley, Seyd & Billingham, 2006: 76), citizens are mobilized to join the party as a result of its campaigning activities, suggesting that the post-1999 BNP's embrace of community politics is exerting an effect at the local level. Though often glossed in the wider comparative literature, these findings point toward the importance of local contextual factors in initially motivating involvement with the extreme right.

Whilst our study casts further light on the dynamics of extreme right activism important questions remain unanswered. Despite a burgeoning literature on extreme right party voters we still know little about the political beliefs and campaigning activities of extreme right party members and activists. In order to probe these seldom addressed issues scholars may need to think in more innovative ways about how to get inside the black box of right-wing extremist organizations. In addition, whilst our focus has rested principally on the question of what initially motivates involvement with a party such as the BNP more research is needed on the inter-related questions of how right-wing extremist parties seek to recruit followers and sustain this commitment over the longer-term.

Table 1: Information about the Sample

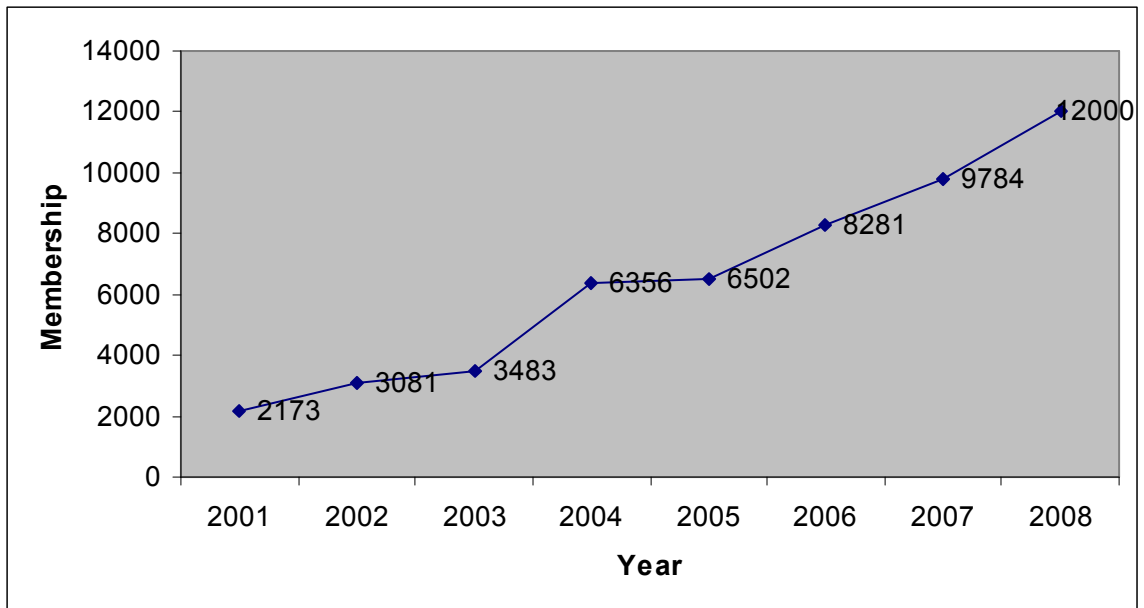
No.	Location	Interviews (number in brackets indicates number of interviews)
1	Greater London	(1) December 2006
2	Yorkshire	(4) September/December 2005, April 2007, March 2008
3	Yorkshire	(2) April 2007 and April 2008
4	Yorkshire	(1) April 2008
5	South West	(4) March/June/August 2006, April 2008
6	South West	(3) September/December 2005 and April 2007
7	South West	(1) March 2006
8	South West	(1) February 2006
9	South East	(1) May 2005
10	North West	(1) January 2006
11	North West	(2) June 2006 and April 2008
12	North West	(2) December 2005 and June 2006
13	North West	(1) May 2005
14	North West	(2) May 2005 and May 2006
15	North West	(1) June 2006 and April 2008
16	North West	(2) May 2006 and October 2006
17	Yorkshire	(2) May 2006
18	South East	(2) June 2006 and September 2006
19	South East	(1) September 2005
20	Yorkshire	(2) May 2006 and October 2006
21	South East	(2) August 2005 and December 2005
22	East Midlands	(1) May 2006
23	South West	(3) June/November 2005 and October 2006
24	BNP Chairman	(3) March/October 2006 and June 2008

Table 2: Electoral Performance of the BNP in Local Elections, 2000-2008

Year	Candidates	Councils Contested	Total Votes
2000	17	12	3,022
2002	67	26	30,998
2003	217	71	101,221
2004	312	59	190,200
2006	363	78	229,389
2007	744	148	292,911
2008	608	90	234,527

Source: BBC Election Archive

Figure 1: BNP Membership data 1999-2008



Source: Self-reported data to the Electoral Commission, party documentation and BBC News.

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¹ Our focus is on active participation not terminology; suffice to say that ‘extreme right’ is considered most appropriate for the British case, specifically the British National Party (Carter, 2005). For a recent overview and contribution to the debate over terminology see for example Mudde (2007: 32-59).

² Some important exceptions are summarized in Goodwin (2010) and Klandermans and Mayer (2006: 3-7).

³ On the stigmatization of extreme right party activists in five West European states see Linden & Klandermans (2006a).

⁴ See also the special issue ‘Ethnographies of the Far Right’ of the *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, vol. 36, no.2.

⁵ Recent studies of ERP activists have been based on interviews with between 24 and 28 activists (e.g. Klandermans and Mayer, 2006: 51-64).

⁶ The complete back-catalogue of *Identity* was made available to me by a local BNP organizer to whom I am grateful.

⁷ My thanks to Nigel Copsey at the University of Teesside for making these available

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¹² ‘Conference sets aims for 1994’, *Spearhead* March 1994, p.18

¹³ N. Griffin, ‘No need to worry’, *Spearhead* Mar 1998, p.9

¹⁴ Lecomber, Anthony (2001) British National Party – forged in the heat of fire, *Patriot*, no.8

¹⁵ On ‘closet Nazi’s see Griffin, Nick (2002) Moving forward for good, *Identity*, 21, (June), pp. 4-5; on ‘sensible types’ see Golding, Paul (2001) Time to get professional and organised!, *Identity*, 11, (July), p.3. See also Griffin, Nick (2004) Where do we go from here? *Identity* (July), pp.4-7

¹⁶ See Griffin, ‘Moving forward for good’, pp. 4-5.

¹⁷ Interview 1 with Nick Griffin March 2006

¹⁸ BNP (2006) Summer school success, *Identity*, 67 (July), p.8

¹⁹ Following the interviews a five-page questionnaire was distributed to all participants and was designed to elicit basic socio-economic data. However, as expected the response rate was low. Only 11 participants returned the questionnaire. Two explanations can be advanced; first, activism in the extreme right is highly-stigmatized and thus activists were reluctant to make available highly personal data (i.e. marital status, income, etc); second, the experience of the initial interview discouraged further involvement with the study. Yet considering that the vast majority of activists agreed to subsequent interviews, the first appears more plausible.

²⁰ BNP (2006) John Bean: a true nationalist, obtainable via BNPTV. Available online: <http://www.bnptv.org.uk/> (Accessed May 2007).

²¹ Griffin, Nick (2006) British nationalism: political party or broad-based popular movement?, *Identity*, 71, (Oct), p. 5

²² Ex-conservatives also appear quite regularly in accounts of new members featured in the party literature. For example BNP (2002) People like you..., *Identity* Issue 25, pp. 8-9; BNP (2001) Interview of the month: Dr James Lockwood, *Identity* Issue No. 8, p.6

²³ Griffin, Nick (2006) Facing the end of liberalism, *Identity*, 70, (Sep), pp. 4-5