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Why did the Far Right gain support in Britain during the early 21st Century?

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Introduction

Following the turn of the 21st century, latent far right sentiment began to work its way to the fore of the political sphere, both on a governmental and street level in Britain. At a governmental level, the meteoric rise of New Labour meant the space once filled by Thatcherism was open, and the British National Party[1] were well set to capitalise on this seemingly viable opportunity. And at street level, a rise in Islamophobia, along with an economic recession which saw a rise in unemployment led to groups such as the English Defence League, Britain First and National Action gaining much more visibility and traction within the disaffected masses of working class individuals.

This dissertation will explore the causations of the growth in far-right activity, and further the motivations of those who choose to affiliate themselves with far right actors. Does the stereotype of angry, white men (Ford and Goodwin, 2010) really hold value, or does support for the far right vary more than this suggests? Both demand and supply play a crucial role in the success of the far right; many sought to find a party that represented and addressed their fears, and from a supply standpoint, the far right were legitimised in mainstream politics through the actions of both politicians and the media.

The first chapter will discuss the socioeconomic characteristics of the individuals who affiliated with far right organisations and parties during the 21st Century, exploring the economic, ethnic and educational similarities, amongst others. There are many characteristics that have followed the support base of the far right through its transition to political "legitimacy", but certain demographical conditions have shifted in the makeup of the voter base. Following on from this, the next three chapters will explore specific motivations of individuals that caused an upturn in the favours of the far right.

Chapter Two will focus on the "Silent Majority" in Britain; the socioeconomically disaffected who were in the lowest sections of the population in terms of their financial position and employment prospects. Why did they decide that their grievances should be directed particularly towards the immigrant community in the country? Was there any truth to the idea of immigrants "taking their jobs"? There were many who felt left behind by the waves of immigration from an increasingly globalised society, and thus the far right aimed to exploit these individuals who felt abandoned by mainstream politics.

[1] Abbreviated to BNP throughout this dissertation

Chapter Three will explore Islamophobia, which was rife in the discourse of politicians and media outlets in the early 21st Century. Arising in part as a reaction to the Gulf War, and then the rise of Islamist extremism, latent Islamophobia was becoming more pervasive in Britain both politically and socially, and this sentiment was exploited particularly by the street level far right groups, who aimed to protect British values and ideals against the "Islamification of Britain".

The fourth, and final chapter of this dissertation will be an exploration of how formal politics in the United Kingdom legitimised the discourse of the far right, and made the ideas that were perhaps once too divisive to gain real support suddenly part of the mainstream political sphere. This legitimisation came from two fronts; mainstream politics had become increasingly centralised following the end of Thatcherism and the rise of New Labour, and the British media, particularly print media, created a space on the right of the political spectrum that the British National Party aimed to fill, and other organisations aimed to exploit this new found legitimisation.

Three particular far right organisations will be focused on to provide a basis to which theory can be applied, namely; the *British National Party* (particularly its resurgence under the leadership of Nick Griffin), the *English Defence League* [2] and *Britain First*. Whilst only the BNP were electorally viable and competitive, both of the grassroots organisations, the EDL and Britain First, gained mass support at a street level, and disseminated their message particularly well across social media.

Arguably the most significant far right group in this time frame was the British National Party. Before the 1990s, the BNP was an electorally unviable *National Front* splinter group, formed by John Tyndall in 1982. They undertook street level activity throughout the 1980s and continued to slowly grow their support base. This was, however, relatively unsuccessful, and thus began a period of modernisation for the BNP during the 1990s. Under the direction of Michael Newland, Eddy Butler and Tony Lecomber, 'this triumvirate had absorbed all the lessons of Millwall and increasingly looked towards the examples of the French National Front and the Austrian Freedom Party as models for a 'new', modern and respectable 'Euro-Nationalism' (Copsey, 2008: 70). This move was crucial to the extension of the scope of the British National Party; it allows the BNP to transition from being considered a neo-Nazi organisation to a genuinely electorally viable (at least at the local level) political party.

[2] Abbreviated to EDL throughout this dissertation

One of the most important aspects of the success of the British National Party is the rise of Nick Griffin to the head of the party. Griffin continued and accelerated the modernisation of the BNP that had been seen during the 1990s, in the hope that they would begin to contest in mainstream political activity. As such, instead of the overt racism of the 1980s and early 1990s, the BNP sought to 'moderate its language and communicate its propaganda through these very same words: freedom … democracy… security… and identity' (Copsey, 2008: 103). This action brought the British National Party relatively into the political mainstream, and a modicum of legitimacy mean that by 2010, the BNP looked like they would be able to gain a significant foothold at the General Election.

It is worth noting that, however, the façade of legitimacy that populism provided was exactly that; a façade. The necessity of modernising was crucial, but ultimately the views of both the membership and leadership had not changed. Roger Griffin notes that 'the neo-Nazi grimace continues to peer out menacingly from under the party's telegenic neopopulist mask for anyone who takes the trouble to look closely' (Griffin, R., 2005: 76), and this is paramount to understanding the niche appeal the party held; they didn't manage to win a single seat at any General Election, but did manage to appeal to over half a million voters at their peak in 2010.

Looking from a non-electoral standpoint, two groups in particular stood out from the rest in terms of their platform and outreach. First, formed in 2009, the English Defence League were a far right, Islamophobic group, who grew rapidly in their first two years of existence and presented themselves as the opposition to the perceived rise of Islamism in Britain. Claimed to be founded by Paul Ray, they were established as an amalgamation of multiple football firms in what Eatwell described as 'cumulative extremism' (Eatwell, 2006) acting in response largely to the increasing profile on Luton of Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah, an offshoot of the now proscribed *Al-Muhajiroun*, who were responsible for many protests against the British military and State, and were proponents of the establishment of Sharia Law in Britain. These smaller firms opposing Islam gained support through an anti-Jihadist movement that had beginning to gain traction across the continent, and in turn the English Defence League was formed. Led in their heyday by Tommy Robinson, at their peak in 2011 it was estimated that the English Defence League had between 25,000 and 35,000 active members (Bartlett and Littler, 2011: 4).

Seen as a response to the assumed “threat” of the “Islamification” of Britain, the English Defence League capitalised on the wider anti-Islamic sentiment that had been pervasive in Britain throughout the early 2000s. Taking advantage of the political space that had been created largely by the BNP, the English Defence League claimed ‘it was a necessary response to the frustration felt by ordinary people at the lack of action being taken by the British government against what it, early on, described as ‘extremist Muslim preachers and organisations’, the EDL clearly echoed Griffin’s earlier comments.’ (Allen, C., 2011: 284). They were never widely successful; their membership was not in the hundreds of thousands, they did not make huge inroads into spreading their message to the wider population, but they were a clear example as to where individuals in Britain felt threatened by Islam, and further immigration, and were reacting in response to what they saw as a threat to their way of life.

Whilst the English Defence League were in decline, a new organisation emerged; Britain First. Founded in 2011 by Jim Dowson, and led by Jayda Fransen and former BNP councillor Paul Golding, they stated that the ‘fightback against the rapid growth of Islam in Britain (Islamification) needs to continue and that they alone will be the ones providing the ‘frontline resistance’’ (Allen, C., 2014: 357). The begun a process of “Christian patrols”, where they acted in clear opposition to Muslims in Britain, through “invasions” of Mosques and their incredibly wide reaching online activity.

Although Britain First did not have a hugely widespread membership, where they excelled was in amassing a huge following on social media. Whilst the number of likes a group gets on Facebook is fairly negligible, as it clearly didn’t translate to votes at the ballot box, but at the end of May 2014 had in excess of 477,000 ‘likes’, more than four times the number the EDL had at its peak (Allen, C., 2014: 358). This number continued to grow, and HOPE Not Hate (2020) note that at their peak, they had over 1.9 million ‘likes’ on Facebook.

This dissertation will cover the crucial reasons as to why the far right gained traction within the British political mainstream following the turn of the millennium. Is the notion of the far right being simply uneducated, white British thugs true? Or are there more significant precursors for support for the far right.

Chapter One

Who Votes for the Far Right?

The far right in Britain saw a rise in support in the early 2000s, with many individuals choosing to vote for the British National Party and to affiliate with organisations on the far right. Within this chapter, the characteristics of those who vote for the far right, in terms of their social class, education level, region, gender and so on will be explored. Cas Mudde (2019: 52) notes that 'The international far right has two stereotypical types of supporters: the grumpy old, white racist … and the heavily tattooed, violent, young Nazi skin' and this very much rang true in Britain during the 1980s. However, following the lull of support for the National Front in the late 1980s, the British National Party led a resurgence of the right, but the appearance of their followers had changed from the skinheads of the National Front.

1.1 Socioeconomic Characteristics

Firstly, this chapter will focus on the relationship of social class and electoral decision making. Class and community play a crucial role in the reasons people would choose to affiliate with, or vote for, a far right party. Despite the traditional stereotype that it is those from the lowest classes of society, many studies found that in the early 2000s, the British National Party were able to gain their largest support from manual *skilled* workers, as well as the lower middle classes; the C1s and C2s (John et. al, 2006: 14). As such, it was not the poorest in the nation who had the strongest affinity to the far right, but those who are positioned just outside of the professional middle classes. This idea is further backed by Ford and Goodwin's study of British National Party support, where they found that 32% of BNP support comes from the C2 social class, with 19% coming from C1, then a combined 38% from the D and E categories. (2010: 9). It is worth noting that the number of skilled manual workers who support the BNP compared to the National Front in the 1970s is significantly less (14%), but the main concentration of support still stems from the C classes. This demonstrates how the British far right have been able to gain traction through presenting themselves as favourable to those who feel most threatened by immigration, particularly where there is the worry of skilled immigrants who were perceived to be intending to take the jobs of British citizens.

The British National Party gained their most success in areas where social deprivation was greater. Whilst this is not the most significant factor of support for the far right (Goodwin, Ford and Cutts, 2012: 899), it does hold traction; support for the British National Party was 'symptomatic of a process that had begun in the 1990s, as conflicts emerged related to political disaffection, competition for resources and spiralling socio-economic deprivation' (Rhodes, 2009:24-25). Far right parties have, particularly in Britain, attempted to position themselves as anti-elite, attempting to capitalise largely on those who felt disillusioned with the seemingly no longer "for the people" Labour Party. Those in the poorest areas of the nation felt left behind by government in the early 2000s, and the BNP aimed to target these areas. They targeted specific areas where they felt there were greater chances of support, with Goodwin, Ford and Cutts finding that 'wards that are located within authorities where there is a BNP branch are also more likely to have a higher than average number of members' (2012: 896). This demand, coupled with a readily available supply of far right activity led to hotspots emerging, particularly in northern towns and cities such as Burnley and Oldham. Deprivation creates the opportunity for the far right to establish a foothold in local politics, and thus explains why many affiliated with the far right during the early 2000s.

Following on from this, it is important to recognise that the British National Party played greatly on the idea of a community, and further romanticised the community ideals that were seen by many white people in Britain as in decline. Whilst the traditional view of a far right voter in the 1970s was that of an uneducated thug, it perhaps can be seen that community breakdown was a crucial indicator to why the British National Party gained success in the early 2000s. The traditional working class in Britain, particularly in areas of deprivation, such as in parts of London's East End or older industrial towns, felt that they were badly represented by welfare policies, and welfare should be based on contribution. As such, immigrants became a target as they were seen to be taking advantage of the system (Gavron, Young and Dench, 2011). This belief was targeted by the BNP particularly, who used campaign slogans such as 'after paying in to the system all our lives, we shouldn't be shoved to the back of the queue by asylum seekers' (BNP, 2006), and further, Roger Eatwell notes that 'the BNP romanticises a lost community in which local people helped each other and in which law and order in the shape of the friendly local 'bobby' was always close at hand' (2006: 210). Ultimately, the British National Party were successful in playing on the fears and concerns that many within the working class felt in relation to the decline of the traditional British "community" and made many feel an affinity with the party.

Those who are of an older generation are more likely to have an affinity for the ideals of a far right organisation than the younger generation. For instance, the British National Party received the overwhelming 'bulk of its support in elections from 'angry white men'; middle-aged or elderly working-class men' (Goodwin, 2011: 126). Whilst to describe them as 'angry white men' as Goodwin does is stereotyping the voters of the far right quite significantly, Rhodes notes that BNP voters are overwhelmingly of an older generation, with '75 per cent being over the age of 35' (2011: 105). Thus, it highlights a key area where the British National Party were able to gain traction, more so than the National Front had done in the 1980s. It is important to recognise that as far right parties gain traction and support, their support base diversifies, and this is why the BNP had the success they did. Mudde notes that 'the most successful populist radical right parties have transformed from working-class parties in the third wave to so-called "Volksparteien" (people's parties), reflecting almost all subgroups of the population, in the fourth wave.' (Mudde, 2019: 57), and this is where the British National Party gained a relative amount of success; they managed to mobilise this percentage of the electorate more than the National Front had done in the 1980s, and in turn were able to present themselves as less of a street level, even youth movement, but as a legitimate political party that could represent the views of the electorate more than any other far right organisation had done previously.

The level of education that individuals have can, to an extent, also present an indication as to where electorally the far right might have success. Throughout the latter half of the 20th Century, research into this link found a correlation between a lower level of education, with Stouffer finding that 'the less educated approve authoritarian and more conformist … practices' (1955: 99). Stouffer's theory holds significant value in relation to contemporary far right, with its application to the right in Britain being evident; 'BNP candidates won more votes in wards where more people were only educated up to 'qualification level 1, or fewer than five 'basic' CSE/GCSEs … but did less well as the proportions of people with qualifications rose'' (John et al, 2006: 15). In their study of the far right in London from a year prior, John, Margetts, Rowland and Weir (2005: 19) found that the level of education within a borough has a direct correlation to the level of BNP support; it 'was higher in wards with higher proportions of residents with no qualifications'. This only furthers the notion that those who affiliate with far right groups have a lower level of education, which can be linked to being less tolerant. This lack of tolerance is crucial to the success of the far right; without societal divisions, in this case on a racial basis, the far right actually present very little attraction.

1.2 Race and Ethnicity

This section will focus on the ethnic makeup of the support base for the far right in Britain, and also further how the presence of ethnicities in a constituency effects the voting decisions of white British people in particular. Nick Griffin believed that 'once ensconced with the mainstream, the party would then act as a beacon of hope for millions of indigenous (white) Britons' (Copsey, 2008: 170), and this targeting of white voters was crucial to the British National Party gaining support. Whilst this might seem obvious, a nationalist party appealing to "indigenous" voters, it is in relation to the previous social demographics that it becomes more specific as to why white Britons chose to affiliate with the BNP. 'BNP campaigns emphasise the alleged threat from Islam, presenting Muslims as being incompatible with 'British' values and representing a threat to the jobs, culture and demographic dominance of 'native' white Britons' (Goodwin and Ford, 2010: 6) and this is a clear evidence of where the British National Party were able to present non-white citizens as opposed to traditional "British" values. The ability of far right groups to be able to alienate white people against non-white individuals, particularly in the case of the far right in the 2000s against Muslims, was paramount to their success.

It is also important to note that a large presence of immigrants within a constituency is a precursor of support for the far right in a locality. Whilst immigration is a consistent threat for many of those who vote for the far right, it can be seen that many who voted for the British National Party held immigrants accountable for the blights of society, such as higher crime rate, reduced job prospects etc. (YouGov, 2009). Further, local constituencies with higher levels of Pakistani and Bangladeshi people saw a greater level of far right support, and with an increase in the size of this group comes 'a strong, positive relationship with the probability of BNP candidacy for both election years. The estimated effect of the relative size of the Indian group on support for the BNP is also positive for both years' (Bowyer, 2008: 616). Whilst this is not the most significant of precursors of support for the far right, the racial threat theory does present a basis of why this area of support existed. Those who affiliated with the far right were threatened by the increased presence of non-white individuals, and the perceived cultural threat that was posed by a larger number of individuals from a different race than their own. Thus, a higher level of ethnic diversity in a local area can provide a basis for support for the far right, particularly in the case of the British National Party at the turn of the century.

Whilst the overwhelming racial makeup of far right voters in Britain was white people, it can be seen that non-electoral groups such as the English Defence League sought to mobilise individuals outside of their typical catchment, with a transition away from racism based purely on appearance. As they believed they were stopping the "implementation of Sharia Law in Britain", the importance of race was less important than religion. Thus, 'true to the spirit of 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend', the EDL's strategy is also to reach out to 'floating groups', such as ethnic communities that share historical angst against Muslims, be that Sikhs or Jews.' (Copsey, 2010: 5). Rather than the overt ethnic racism affiliated with the far right, the EDL used cultural racism instead, where the discrimination was indiscriminatory; all Muslims were perceived as the enemy and as such were able to alienate members against Muslims in Britain. Whilst this perhaps seems apologetic for the English Defence League, it is still blatantly obvious, as will be discussed throughout the remainder of this essay, that the EDL were overtly racist and highly discriminatory. Although this makes up a very small proportion of the support base, it is still interesting that in the case of the English Defence League, they were interested in gaining support outside of their stereotypical target audience.

Goodwin's theory of the British far right voter being stereotypically angry, white men does hold value; the majority of voters are indeed white, and many come from lower economic income backgrounds and feel disillusioned with mainstream politics. It does, however, almost offer a slightly apologist stance on the causations of far right voting; without these individuals seeing the appeal of the racially divisive far right actors in Britain, and holding racist views themselves, the far right would never have gained a foothold in these demographics. Social deprivation played a crucial role in the rise of the far right, with parties such as the British National Party using a populist tactic to present themselves as anti-elite and play on the grievances of those in Britain who were most socioeconomically disaffected. Through targeting specific demographics within the population, the far right were able to gain traction in certain subsets of the electorate, and found their most success in the lower, working classes, those who are less educated and ultimately white voters, who they were able to alienate against both the incumbent regime as well as the immigration that had been ongoing since the end of World War Two.

Chapter Two

'The Silent Majority'

The idea that individuals have been left behind by a globalised, multicultural society is not exclusive to the 21st Century; the push of immigration in the immediate post-war period led to increased racial tensions within the nation, and racial difference has been a significant flashpoint for many of those with an affinity for extreme right organisations. Nick Griffin aimed to speak for the white 'silent majority'; those who were disfavoured by the political establishment, and in turn presented an argument for positive discrimination for these people. This creation of the silent majority allowed the British National Party to gain traction within this section of the electorate, as they were able to alienate individuals against the mainstream political parties, and further against the "other" in society. However, is it fair to say that the sole reason these people voted is because they were politically and economically disaffected? Or whether it is little more than blatant racism that gives these individuals a reason to vote. This chapter will seek to explore why many individuals targeted the blame for their personal grievances largely at the immigrant population of Britain, and how the far right were best suited to exploit this.

2.1 A New, Populist, British National Party

This section will focus on the populism that the British National Party employed in order to appeal to the silent majority in Britain. Under the direction of Nick Griffin, the BNP used a significantly populist campaign method in order to appeal to those who felt disaffected by politics in the United Kingdom. Gone was the overt fascism of the British National Party under the direction of John Tyndall, and in was a new approach to politics. 'It had endeavoured to present itself as a party of respectable 'democratic nationalists' – just ordinary folk who were prepared to speak up for the 'silent majority'. (Copsey, 2008: 148) and in doing so, they hoped to mobilise those who felt disillusioned with the incumbent government. They pledged to tackle the rise in asylum-seekers, which was a critical issue for many, along with issues that would resonate with their target demographic, namely a clamp down on criminality, particularly from immigrant communities, and 'populism (which promises government close to the people) had struck a chord with many for whom the mainstream parties offered little more than political spin.' (Copsey, 2008: 148). This area of the electorate was a crucial bastion of support for the far right, and in turn it created a path upon which the British National Party could gain success by targeting those who felt most disaffected by specific issues affected the nation.

Through mobilising those who resent the incumbent political elite, the British National Party were able to gain a foothold in areas of the nation that were most affected by the socioeconomic "threat" that immigration presents. Thomson notes that these individuals believe that 'the established political parties ignore 'the people' and support policies which threaten 'the heartland'.' (2004: 143), and in turn political parties such as the BNP are best placed to exploit this sentiment, through positioning themselves as an anti-establishment party. Further, the BNP employed slogans characteristic of a neopopulist party, such as 'Freedom, Security, Identity and Democracy' (Golding, 2001: 3) which was crucial to simplifying their message to make it more easily accessible to many. Griffin himself, understandably, refused to label the British National Party as populist, as 'to be a 'populist', within the lexicon of the British far right, is to be an apostate, and such terminology is strictly off-limits, especially if one wants to retain the support of those hardline intransigents who were yet to catch up with the party leadership' (Copsey, 2007: 75). Instead, Griffin favoured the term 'Popular Nationalism', as he believed that by doing this, he was successfully representing the views of the ordinary white British citizens through a fundamentally nationalist political project. Copsey notes that 'National-populism claims to speak for the silent majority ('the ordinary people') against the 'corrupt' political establishment and promises positive discrimination in the majority's favour' (2007: 65), and thus populism was used to appeal to the crucial sectors of the electorate, particularly those who felt most disillusioned with the political mainstream, and thus Griffin was again able to appeal to the silent majority within Britain.

2.2 The Fight for Resources

Further looking at the importance of the silent majority in the rise of the far right, it can be seen that the decline in industrialism in the nation has acutely affected the support base of the far right, and during the first decade of the 21st Century, the British National Party were able to exploit the old Labour 'heartlands' to gain support. After feeling left behind by politics in the late 20th Century, many of the traditional Labour voters felt that they were no longer being represented by their party under the leadership of Tony Blair. Further, it can be seen that as these individuals 'endured the most difficult of living and working conditions and had to fight for every tiny advantage they could accrue, protectionism became both a necessary survival strategy and, eventually, the foundation of a way of life based on various forms of exclusive social networks' (Evans, 2012: 22). This intrinsic protectionism suddenly makes the threat of immigration seem incredibly viable, and the age old adage of immigrants coming into the nation and "taking our jobs" becomes a legitimate concern. Thus, Griffin began to target immigrants with his rhetoric, and in doing so managed to portray immigration as a significant issue for those who were effected most by the decline in industry in working towns, and further the job squeeze that began with rising unemployment.

The increasing scarcity of resources in certain urban and economically deprived areas is key to the success of the British National Party. Many of the individuals within this subsection are considered as "modernisation losers"; those who lost out due to advancement of social and cultural industrialisation, and 'unable to cope with the acceleration of economic, social, and cultural modernisation, these people are its most prominent victims.' (Betz, 1994: 32), and this is a crucial area where the far right in Britain were able to gain traction. Bowyer corroborates this thesis, where he notes that 'individuals without the skills and formal education demanded in a global economy will be most supportive of extreme right parties' (2008: 617), and that the higher the levels of deprivation, both economically and educationally, the higher the levels of support for the British National Party within the electoral wards examined. Whilst this is not specifically related to the 'silent majority' that Griffin spoke of, it is a key area of the electorate for the British National Party; those who felt most disaffected by mainstream politics and in turn felt an affinity with the rhetoric of the far right. The link between multiculturalism and modernisation made by the right demonstrates where the far right in Britain were able to gain a foothold within this section of the population.

2.3 Disaffected, or just racist?

In this section, the claim that the 'silent majority' affiliate with far right parties and organisations because of economic injustices will be analysed, or whether it is simply blatant racism that dominates the reasoning for individuals from this demographic aligning themselves with the far right. Linehan notes that the stereotypical far right voter would be 'disillusioned with mainstream politics and parties [and] have no political or cultural ties to traditional labour organisations', but perhaps more importantly, 'be ethnocentric and xenophobic, culturally parochial and lives in an area where he perceives that he is in competition with immigrants or other ethnic groups over access to scarce resources.' (2005: 173–174). This in itself was a crucial indication of where it is perhaps too favourable to the far right to discard a significant precursor of support for the far right; a large proportion of these individuals' views were based on an intrinsic racism that supersedes any economic condition. The racially dominated rhetoric of the far right was best set to capitalise on the views of these individuals, and thus presents a clear indication as to why the far right had an upturn in their success.

Despite the acceptance that there is indeed a subset of the nation that are disillusioned with politics and were mobilised by the rhetoric of the British National Party, it is more common to see that British National Party voters are first and foremost directed by prejudicial viewpoints that they hold. Whilst there are alternative motivations for many to support far right organisations in Britain, it can still be seen that 'extreme racist views, such as the belief that black Britons are intellectually inferior, still loom large as the strongest motivation driving BNP support' (Cutts, Ford and Goodwin, 2011: 419). This in itself is important to consider; whilst it is easy to contemplate the socioeconomic factors that drive many individuals to support the far right, it is important not to forget that fundamentally racist or prejudicial views dominate much of the thinking of British National Party members. In their study, Cutts, Ford and Goodwin further note that '95 per cent of BNP voters desire a total halt to immigration, compared to 55 per cent of the wider electorate; and 81 percent agree that Islam is a danger to the West, compared to 42 per cent of the wider electorate' (2011: 427). Thus, it can be seen that the far right were able to gain support for their rhetoric and ideological standpoint because of a fundamental agreement with the racism that accompanies the far right in Britain, even if Nick Griffin had attempted to state that the BNP were no longer a racist organisation as it was under the leadership of John Tyndall.

When looking at the views of those who feel an affinity to the far right in Britain, there is no clearer evidence of racial views dominating the views of many of these individuals than the actions of street level groups, such as the English Defence League and Britain First. The ability of these groups to disseminate a highly racially divisive message was crucial in their ability to attract members, with Chris Allen suggesting that 'the impressive number of likes that Britain First has been able to attract not only enhances its populist appeal but provides it with a constant - albeit largely passive - constituency to whom it is able to drip-feed nationalistic and Islamophobic content' (2014: 358). Britain First used a specific type of racism, Islamophobia (as will be discussed in the following chapter in more depth), to appeal to many in Britain, presenting themselves as the defence against the "Islamification" of the nation, and in turn representing the needs of the average white Briton. They sought to present non-white individuals as the political 'other' and used their loosely Christian ideological base to incite hatred towards other religious groups. For instance, leaders such as Paul Golding drew 'upon the common far-right ideology that Muslims are prejudiced towards other religious groups, in order to justify his prejudice towards Muslims' (Burke, 2018: 373). Britain First claimed to be acting again on behalf of this specific set of white, British people, and used religious stereotypes to further divide the nation between the silent majority and those who threaten this section of the nation.

There is indeed a level of truth and validity to the idea that a proportion of those who voted for the far right felt disaffected by the incumbent government, and further that the far right were able to capitalise on this sentiment. Griffin's idea of a "silent majority", however, stems more from a position of prejudice than injustice and disillusion. These individuals sought to blame minorities, particularly those of a different skin colour to their own, for their own personal grievances. Asian immigrants, in particular Muslims, were targeted specifically as "alien" to British culture and were treated as an "enemy" by far right groups, both political and street level. Thus, it can be seen that whilst there are some who affiliate with the far right because of socioeconomic reasons, cultural and ethnic reasoning is still the basis for the majority, who feel threatened in their own economic position and find it easiest to direct their anger and anxieties towards minority communities.

Chapter Three

The Rise in Islamophobia

In the 21st Century, the rise of Islamophobia is paramount to the relative successes of groups on the far right. A surge in Islamist terrorism, particularly at the turn of the century, led to an irrational fear of Islam and its followers, and, when coupled with the sensationalism that is pervasive in the British media, it led to Islamophobia becoming a key factor as to why the far right gained support in the post 9/11 period. Media and governmental discourse surrounding Islamic terrorism has played to strengthen the case of far right organisations when they highlight their concern of the "Islamification" of Britain, and plays into the idea that the far right are on the front line in the fight against extremism. This chapter will aim to explore the rise in Islamophobia that was seen in Britain since the 1990s, and further how the far right were able to exploit the rise in Islamophobia to gain support in the early 2000s.

3.1 Political Polarisation

Firstly, this chapter will explore the political polarisation of culture that was seen in Britain particularly in the early 2000s, and further how anti-Islamic sentiments became pervasive in wider British culture, and in turn made Muslims in Britain a target for political organisations. The rise in British nationalist organisations can be seen to stem from the mass polarisation of cultures between the "Western" and "Islamic" worlds following the attacks of September 11th, 2001. This was not immediately evident; both politicians and press worked to further this divide, with events in the 1990s such as the Gulf War, which were portrayed as a war against Islam, led to an increasingly hostile view from white Britons against Muslims, and this continued to grow during the 1990s. Field notes that 'by summer 2001, however, the Islamophobic storm clouds were regathering as a consequence of heightened international tensions linked to perceived Islamic fundamentalism and terrorism' (Field, 2001: 453). 9/11 just exacerbated this sentiment, with Field's study finding that 90% of individuals pointing the blame for the Anglo-American offensive in Afghanistan at Islamic fundamentalist terrorism, and 40% at Islam itself. (Field, 2001: 453). These heightened tensions fundamentally created the space for the growth in the far right based on blatantly Islamophobic rhetoric that was mainstreamed through the actions of government. Public sentiment thus was, albeit perhaps at the extreme level, echoed by organisations such as the British National Party, and demonstrates a crucial opportunity for the far right to gain mainstream support.

Further, the difference between Muslims and Islamic extremists became blurred by far right groups, and allowed an attack of the wider Muslim community on the grounds of a tiny minority of individuals. It is important to note that whilst Muslims are members of the Islamic faith, 'It is not only that Muslims in Britain are regarded as an illusory mass but also that religion has come to stand in for race, complete with attributes that are attached to this 'singular' community' (Williamson and Khiabany, 2010: 86). This polarity in culture presents a key facet to where the rise in Islamist extremism in the 21st Century stems from; far right organisations, particularly the English Defence League and Britain First, have 'adeptly exploited … anti-Islam sentiment and hostility directed at Muslim people' (Treadwell and Garland, 2011: 626), particularly in the lower socioeconomic strata within the nation. Thus, this sentiment is echoed within portions of the nation, and resonates with many of those who fail to register the distinction between race and religion, and further that those who hold the Islamic faith are able to not synonymous with extremists. This highlights a key area where latent Islamophobia is exploited by far right organisations to gain support and further membership.

3.2 The Defence against the "Islamification of Britain"

The English Defence League built their support base on a message of opposing the perceived "Islamification" of Britain, attempting to hide their ideological Islamophobia that stemmed out of a 'particularly unattractive and intolerant strand of English nationalism.' (Copsey, 2010: 5). Through their rhetoric, whilst representing the stereotypical anti-Islamic standpoint of many modern far right actors in Britain, they were able to, albeit in very small pockets, gain support from less traditional support bases, with an 'ideological premise that is typically discriminatory, but, at the same time, appeals to the typically discriminated.' (Allen, 2011: 294). Allen goes on to note that the EDL were 'able to disseminate its message in an unobtrusive and immediate way, indiscriminately and passively drip-feeding the 'sentiment or vibe' - ideological Islamophobia - about Muslims and Islam that is becoming increasingly seen as normal and unproblematic.' (Allen, 2011: 294). This Islamophobic discourse played on the fears and grievances of many individuals; it is why they had such success in Luton, where the likes of Anjem Choudary and the since proscribed al-Muhajiroun had gained a base of support through their anti-British protests, largely concerning the British Army and its action in Afghanistan. Thus, the EDL have used Islamophobia to gain support, with their hostility towards Islam being disseminated throughout their support base.

Further, the EDL worked to construct a 'heroic image' (Treadwell and Garland, 2011) in order to gain mass support for the ideals it represented. They believed that they portrayed the issues of normal English people, and their opposition to Islam stemmed from a belief in protecting an ideal of "Britishness" that is misaligned and misinformed, and plays on the fears of those who support them. The English Defence League directed their anger against Islamist extremism towards the wider Muslim communities through public demonstrations, the largest of which having 3000 attend in Luton in 2011, and 'have enabled some activists to legitimise this violence by situating it within a heroic narrative about how they are protecting their community, country and/or culture from the advance of (militant) Islam' (Busher, 2013: 80). Through their Islamophobic rhetoric, they alienated many against Muslims and in turn gained support through a highly divisive method, aiming to continue the othering of Muslims and spreading their message to those who perhaps would not actively seek the far right.

3.3 Britain First

This section will now provide and analysis of Britain First and how they exploited anti-Muslim sentiment to gain popularity and disseminate their propaganda through their widespread social media platform. The perceived cultural disparity between Islam and "Britishness", in the eyes of Britain First, has been suggested to be a doomsday style, prophetic ideological battle. In their summary of Britain First as a far right organisation, *HOPE Not Hate* (2020) highlight the necessity to consider that Jim Dowson, the founder of Britain First, was 'dedicated to Calvinist chauvinism, religious bigotry and the raptures of evangelical and biblical Armageddon/doomsday prophecies.' (HOPE Not Hate, 2020). This fundamentalist Christianity has played a significant role in shaping the views of the leadership, and whilst perhaps not being mirrored within the support base, directs much of the action taken. Britain First argued that they provided the frontline resistance against the blight that, in their eyes, Islam provided on society, and therefore as Allen notes, 'it is unsurprising to see Britain First becoming increasingly antagonistic and indeed confrontational towards Muslims and their communities.' (Allen, 2014: 357). This move to disrupt Muslim communities through undertaking "Christian patrols" and "mosque invasions" manifested themselves as the crux of Britain First's actions, and thus explains their Islamophobic rhetoric; it is in essence a 21st Century crusade, and explains the motivations of many to affiliate with an organisation such as this.

Britain first used social media incredibly successfully to gain a widespread online following through removing the separation between Muslims and Islamist extremists. Their anti-Islamic rhetoric was disseminated through their social media platforms, particularly where they used their 'Facebook page to share a mix of extreme anti-Muslim content, images and videos from their protests' (Davidson and Berezin, 2018: 489). This was a success that had not, nor at the point of writing this dissertation, been matched by any mainstream political party in Britain; they held a social media presence that was further reaching than any other political organisation in Britain. Through this platform, they reached an audience far beyond those actively seeking to engage with the far right (gaining 1.9 million likes on Facebook (HOPE Not Hate, 2020)), and played on the fundamental patriotism that forms a key part of what many British people see as their identity. Whilst being registered as a party from 2014 until 2017, Britain First did not ever gain anything that resembled electoral success, yet their social media presence was astronomical in terms of numbers of views, shares etc.

3.4 Media Representation of Muslims

This next section will now focus on the role of the media, and how media played a part in mainstreaming the ideas and actions of the far right in Britain. Media representation of Muslim people was, and still is, crucial in inciting divisions between the two cultures, which is exploited by far right organisations to gain popularity. Print media in particular has been instrumental in spreading a racially divisive message, which in itself has led to a growth of support for groups such as the English Defence League. Meer notes that 'prominent print media journalists … fear that Muslims are currently at odds with something integral to life in Britain, if not with modernity itself.' (2004: 36) This line of argument, often spread by those considered to be Print Media Public Intellectuals (PMPIs), is consumed by a multitude of social groups, however it is often those who are less educated who fail to question the sensationalism of the British media, and thus have an affinity with the rhetoric of PMPIs. Rod Liddle, speaking in 2007, said that:

'Islam is masochistic, homophobic and a totalitarian regime. It is a fascistic, bigoted and medieval religion. I have plenty of friends who are Muslims and I know other Muslims I don't get along with. I may be Islamophobic but I am not against the religion. As long as we're able to say what we think about Islam and Muslims without fear of censorship, being accused of racism or having our heads cut off then we're heading in the right direction' Rod Liddle 'What the panel thought', (Evening Standard, 2007.)

This view of Islam is mirrored in the rhetoric of the British National Party, who, in response to the War on Terror, created a 'reified and intrinsically violent image of Islam.' (Verkuyen, 2011: 357). By taking this view of Islam, and equating it to a wide view of individuals who practice the Islamic faith, they move Muslims into the political "other", and in turn incite a fear of an entire collection of people, rather than specific individuals in their faith.

The British National Party used the rhetoric of print media to their advantage, in that they were able to disseminate their wider racist and ethnonationalist views in a fashion which was very much in line with that of the national discourse. They chose select segments of the Quran, and use highly sensationalised media and publications to attempt to win over the minds of the masses. For instance, writing in 2005, Nick Griffin wrote that:

'Terrorism; the slaughter of innocents; war against the Unbelievers; mass murder – all are (assuming the words of various Koranic verses are taken to have their ordinary English meaning) 'justified' in the Koran, and anyone who denies this a liar. How can we say such Politically Incorrect things? Because we have studied the Koran, and because we in the BNP pride ourselves on telling the truth, no matter what it costs us.' (Griffin, N., 2005)

Whilst using a view of religious scripture that is in line with the ideological position of the BNP, Griffin as leader also addresses one key issue; he is stating that the BNP were not in fact bigoted, but merely telling the truth. It is noted by Wood and Finlay that Nick Griffin 'presents this danger as almost a badge of honour – they are prepared to run the risk of, presumably, disparagement and further prosecution' (2008: 717). This overtly Islamophobic stance actually won over many sections of the electorate, even if it did not translate into a successful political project at the ballot box.

Islamophobia provides a crucial area as to where the British far right have been able to gain popularity and support. Tacit support through likes and shares on social media boosts the profile of organisations such as Britain First and the English Defence League, whilst Eatwell's mediatization thesis rings true for the successes of the British National Party throughout the first decade of the 21st Century, normalising the rhetoric of far right actors and mainstreaming their ideals. Whilst the majority of supporters would not describe themselves as Islamophobic (for a start, they believe that their fear of Islam is rational), their blatant anger and fear of Muslims causes divisions which only play to strengthen the position of far right organisations, and persuade individuals to affiliate with them.

Chapter Four

No Longer in the Political Wilderness

The far right gained a significant amount of political legitimisation throughout the early 21st Century, and it provides a clear explanation for the rise in support for the far right in Britain. Both from an internal and external position, the far right were removed from the political wilderness and pushed much more into the mainstream political sphere, through both their actions, but also the actions of the British government and media. This led to a significant uptake in support for the far right, as will be discussed.

4.1 From the Streets to the Ballot Box

The move away from the overt biological racism that had been characteristic of the British far right throughout the post-war period led to the British National Party gaining significant traction within the electorate. The public image was less of skinheads and more of suits, with political legitimacy being the key aim of the BNP. Allen suggests that this was crucial to the success of the British National Party;

> *'The BNP extended the frontier of the far right in British politics. Through its clear and explicit shift towards more openly anti-Muslim and anti-Islam messages, it not only found a resonance in the contemporary socio-political landscape but so too did it tap into the views of a reasonable number in British society.' (Allen, 2011: 283)*

This was key in determining the successes of the party; they were able to portray themselves as legitimate political party in the eyes of the electorate, and as such gain votes from those in society who perhaps did not fit the image of the stereotypical far right voter. Legitimisation was key to the success of the BNP in the early 2000s; for decades, the far right in Britain had failed to resemble a genuine political party, instead resembling a street level movement. Nick Griffin's iteration of the BNP were able to take a step away from this, and thus gained levels of support that were not seen previously by the party.

As an attempt to legitimise the party, Nick Griffin began a process of modernising the British National Party, in order to remove them from the skinhead image that had plagued the far right throughout the late 20th Century. This, he felt, was crucial to the party being able to gain anything that resembles political success. Gone was the image of thuggery, and instead suits and populism were the method of choice for the BNP. They aimed to target northern cities rather than London, and 'as part of the attempt to pursue a more populist style of politics, the BNP has sought to broaden its appeal by targeting the (white) British 'silent majority'.' (Thomson, 2004: 77). This was a clear positive for the BNP; they aimed to gain more reputable electoral success rather than portray imagery of violence and thuggery. This demonstrates where political legitimisation was crucial to the success of the party; from an electoral standpoint, success was evident, in just 3 years of Griffin's leadership, the BNP gained three seats in local elections Burnley in May 2002. They also won 16.4% of the vote in Oldham West in the 2001 General Election, and highlighted that whilst these were specific localities, there was a rising support for the ideals of the British National Party, and they were being presented in such a method that made the party an appealing choice at the ballot box.

The successes of Tony Blair's "New" Labour, and further the demise of the Conservative Party during the early 2000s, created a Conservative Party that could no longer fall back on traditional Conservatism in order to dominate the centre of the political spectrum. Thus, they sought to change the political landscape in Britain. Labour had begun to dominate the centre, adopting many traditional Conservative policies, such as 'free market neo-liberal economic policies, the reduction of the welfare budge through welfare into work, conceptualizing the user of public sector services as a consumer' (Charteris-Black, 2006: 580), and as such the Conservative Party needed a policy area in the mid-2000s that Labour would not be able to expand their monopoly to. Thus, the Conservative Party 'sought to exploit the topicality of immigration and asylum in the media.' (Charteris-Black, 2006: 565). This was a key area where the British National Party were able to exploit a period of political legitimization of their discourse. Applying Roger Eatwell's *Political Opportunity Thesis*, the electoral fortunes of the British National Party can be seen as partly as an affect of 'British politicians taking an increasingly hard line on the growing number of asylum-seekers' (Eatwell, 2003: 55). The British National Party were perhaps slightly less intelligent in their actions; they targeted individuals rather than actions, with 'the centre-right discuss[ing] 'immigration' while the far right tends to discuss 'immigrants'' (Charteris-Black, 2008: 568). It is still evident, however, that the far right's discourse was to some extent legitimised by mainstream politics in the early 2000s.

The existence of capitalism, and the wider acceptance of capitalism in Britain led to the far right transitioning to focus on sociocultural issues, and thus aim for political legitimacy through accepting the incumbent system, yet presenting a much more socially authoritarian doctrine. This created 'an available constituency of socioculturally authoritarian voters whose value profile was unrequited by centripetal mainstream parties' (Allen, 2017: 2). Despite the space being created for the far right, it was crucial that this section of the electorate was created; without it, there would not have been target audience for the actions of the British National Party, and they would not have been able to present themselves as politically legitimate. The British far right were able to capitalise on the space created by instead of aiming for a fascist regime, as the likes of Oswald Mosley had been proponents of during the 20th Century, aiming to fit in to the existing political spectrum whilst simultaneously attacking it. The British National Party in particular aimed to exploit this, where in they were seen to be a more politically legitimate organisation, and as such slotted into the political mainstream more successfully than any far right party had managed to do so previously.

However, it is notable that far right were ultimately not explicitly successful; they did not gain seats in parliament, nor did their message truly become pervasive in the political mainstream. Yet in the early 21st Century, the far right saw an upturn in popularity, both in terms of the political mainstream and in fringe groups. The British National Party revolutionised themselves into a genuine political party, and mass dissemination of their ideals by the media, even if inadvertently, led to an upturn in the favours of the far right. Cutts, Ford and Goodwin note that:

The ability of the BNP to further expand its electoral support base in future domestic elections will depend on its ability to expand its appeal to the much broader anti-immigrant and anti-establishment constituency of voters that have provided a more stable and enduring support base for the larger and more successful continental populist radical right.' (Cutts, Ford and Goodwin, 2011: 419)

Without being able to appeal to the wider public in mass numbers, the far right in Britain will simply never be able to compete as a truly viable electoral alternative.

4.2 Did the Media Mainstream the Far Right?

This section will now explore the political mainstreaming that the rhetoric of the far right went through as a result of widespread media adopting a further right standpoint on many issues. Without the mainstreaming of the views of the far right, it would be much harder for groups such as the English Defence League to gain any sort of foothold in politics. Yet at the end of the 2010s, they managed to gain a fairly widespread reach, largely as a result of the actions of the media. Their views were perhaps not considered as extreme as they would have been should they not have been the discourse of the newspapers, political actors and government ministers, particularly in their attack of Muslims. As such, it can be said that 'The English Defence League are indeed a symptom; not, as they claim, of 'Islamic extremism', but of the increasingly socially acceptable discourse of 'problematic Muslims'.' (Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015: 183), and that with the othering of Muslims by the mainstream media in Britain, the far right were able to disseminate their message in a more socially acceptable manner. Thus the issue then arises; just tackling the English Defence League and their actions was not enough, and it was indeed 'confrontation of the entrenched societal Islamophobia that makes such a movement possible' (Kassimeris and Jackson, 2015: 183) that was required in order to tackle the rise of Islamophobia, in particular, in Britain.

The British National Party sought to exploit the actions of the mass media, and further how the mass media portrayed specific demographics of individuals in the nation, particularly Muslims. Nick Griffin himself recognised this opportunity, where he stated that 'We should be positioning ourselves to take advantage for our own political ends of the growing wave of public hostility to Islam currently being whipped up by the mass media' (Griffin, 2007). This is indeed characteristic of the media in Britain, as Eatwell's *mediatization thesis* corroborates; the media have a tendency to focus on the most contentious issues in society, such as 'illegal immigration, bogus asylum-seekers, overly favourable treatment of immigrants, crime (especially drugs and prostitution), and problematic cultural differences' (Eatwell, 2003: 55). British print media, in particular, have a tendency to sensationalise stories and spread an often racially inciteful rhetoric amongst a population who are stereotypically nationalistic. Further, the British population were not particularly quick to challenge the news they consumed, with Allen noting that despite the fact that 'British newspapers were emblazoned with sensationalist headlines asking 'Is this the end of the world?' or declaring 'Apocalypse' a day after 9/11, few even thought about even the merest potential for exaggeration' (Allen, 2010: 222). Thus, the role of the media cannot be undermined when considering the reasons for the uptake in support for the far right in Britain; their views were drawn into the political mainstream, and it allowed for wider dissemination of their views without any direct campaigning.

The use of "new media" and the ability to amass a huge following was crucial to the rise of Britain First in the early 2010s. Within this period, Britain First gained a social media presence that has been unrivalled by any political organisation previously or since. Playing on the crusade-esque actions of the English Defence League, and capitalising on the support for this, Britain First were able to spread their message across a wide platform with a huge outreach and managed to take their Facebook support to street level action, namely their "Christian patrols". With Britain first using 'the new media for propaganda and as a recruitment tool of people and money' (Koch, 2017: 20), it in turn demonstrates a crucial area where despite not being directly promoted by the social media platforms itself, more ordinary people were passively consuming their rhetoric. Social media was a key area for the spread of far right content, with a 13% rise of individuals who had seen racism daily on social media between 2016 and 2019 (Booth, 2019), and it is noted that there is indeed public support for these views, with the creation of significant hostility towards immigration and further migrants which was 'evident within both the media and the public opinion' (Shankley and Rhodes, 2020: 218). This demonstrates how new media in particular was a key reason as to how the far right were able to gain success; they achieved an element of legitimacy for its rhetoric in the eyes of the general public, which is crucial to the success of any political entity, let alone one with a more extreme ideological base.

The far right in the early 2000s gained political legitimacy from two key areas; the political elite and through the use of media to mainstream their once taboo ideology. No longer did the far right have to limit themselves to being seen as a grassroots, almost militaristic entity, and thus began a period where the ideas of the far right were increasingly accepted in the discourse of the major political parties, as well as being adopted increasingly so by a sensationalist media. Without the actions of political actors such as the Conservative Party under the leadership of Michael Howard, but also through the widespread media usage of incredibly similar ideas to those of the British National Party and other far right groups, the far right, specifically the BNP, would not have achieved anywhere near the support they did. Thus, the political legitimisation of the far right in the early 2000s provided a key reason as to why they gained support in the manner that they did.

Conclusion

The turn of the 21st Century saw an uptake in support for the far right in Britain. Whilst perhaps the ideals of the far right had long been echoed within the electorate, the modernisation process that the British National Party had undertaken was crucial to the success of the far right. Based on purely a socioeconomic standpoint, the typical voter for the far right had transitioned in the period between the downfall of John Tyndall and the rapid rise of Nick Griffin's modernised BNP; no longer was support concentrated in pockets of youth, and instead an older, poorer and more wary of immigration stereotypical supporter emerged. The downturn of traditional industries and upturn in immigration in many industrial areas saw a hostility towards migrants that played nicely into the rhetoric of the right.

Much of the discussion up to this point surrounding the breakthrough of the far right in the early 21st Century suggests that those who voted for the far right were simply disaffected by mainstream politics, and in a poor economic position, and to some extent this is true. The BNP were successful in alienating many from this section of the electorate into agreeing with their hateful rhetoric, but ultimately without these individuals having a fairly significantly racist standpoint for many of these views, attempting to pin the blame for their personal grievances on the immigrant population of Britain would have fell on deaf ears.

Largely, the scholarly narrative points to the British National Party gaining support in the 21st Century because political and socioeconomic injustices that many felt they were experiencing were not addressed by the government at the time, and they presented an alternative for this "silent majority" which seemed wildly convincing to a significant part of the electorate. However, this turnaround from the overt racism and perhaps even Neo-Nazism of the National Front that gained such traction seems quite frankly naïve to discount. The British National Party still were quite blatantly racist, specifically targeting immigrants who were seen as a blight on the nation, and the British National Party offered 'to give people a chance to say they don't want multiculturalism, they don't want integration and they want, as Mr Tyndall used to say, a white Britain'. (Trilling, 2013: 124). Thus, without the blatant racism that was seen, particularly in terms of the Islamophobia that was pervasive throughout the early 21st Century, the far right would not have seen anywhere near the amount of support that they did.

From a non-electoral perspective the far right, particularly the English Defence League and Britain First, were well placed to capitalise on the highly racially divisive rhetoric of the mass media in Britain, and this coupled with latent racism that was held in the overwhelming majority of those who affiliated with these groups, led to an environment where the far right could garner support with far more ease than seen previously. Thus, the British far right gained more success during the early 21st Century because of the racial connotations that were attached to the socioeconomic grievances that many individuals within their support base felt.

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