

## [CN]Chapter 18

### [CT]Cross-National Ideology in Local Elections

#### [CST]The Case of *Azione Sociale* and the British National Party<sup>1</sup>

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#### [A]Introduction

Extreme-right parties in Europe have gone beyond their former status as a marginal, or even exotic, phenomenon in electoral politics. For the last twenty years, in virtually all countries of the European Union (EU), such parties have shown themselves capable of electoral success, gaining policy concessions from governing parties or even determining the actual process of policy making and influencing the public debate on key issues. Even in Britain, traditionally seen as one of the few outlying cases where the extreme right could not penetrate, the situation has evolved. Since the British National Party (BNP) has been led by Nick Griffin, it has experienced a continual, though hardly spectacular, growth at the local level, leading to the election of a number of local councillors, a member of the London Assembly and two MEPs. It started to receive support from parts of the electorate that one would not normally associate with such a party and the strategy of the BNP in recent years has been to move beyond the classical enclaves of extreme-right support. In Italy, *Azione Sociale* (AS, Social Action) led by Alessandra Mussolini, similarly had representatives in local government across Italy and had also been represented in the European parliament. Since the parliamentary elections of 2008, it has been a constitutive part of Silvio Berlusconi's *Popolo della Libertà* (PDL, People of Freedom) coalition. In March 2009 AS became completely merged within the PDL along with other parties on the Italian right such as *Forza Italia* and *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN, National Alliance), although its members still maintain a certain level of independent activism.<sup>2</sup> Despite being forced to camouflage somewhat its neo-fascist identity within this new party, it has received notable benefits in terms of media coverage which go well beyond the election of Mussolini to the Italian parliament.

In this chapter we analyse the political discourse of both the BNP and AS during local elections. The aim is to highlight what unifies these two parties, placing emphasis on the transnational similarities of the extreme right across European borders, in particular ultra-nationalism and xenophobia. Our analysis is based on party literature including both manifestos and other electoral material such as campaign flyers as well as statements made by party leaders in the media. We gathered material used during the local elections of 2006 including campaign material that circulated on the Internet of both the national party and local sections or affiliates. We have thus chosen to link a localist dimension with a cross-national focus. We also wish to show that, setting aside the impact of immigration and the processes of ‘ethnic competition’ (well-described in this volume by Goodwin), the progression of the extreme right could also be due to an apparent external moderation of their political discourse and the abandonment of references to a more radical (explicitly fascist or neo-fascist) past. However, we consider these particular parties to still represent authentic cases of neo-fascism (and not as mere ‘populist’ or ‘national-populist’ parties), albeit with a veneer of respectability. Finally, we conclude with some reflections on the public reception of these parties and their leaders in the media.

### **[A]The Extreme Right in Italy and Great Britain**

Italy represents an obvious reference point for scholars of the extreme right and not only because of the historical development of fascism, the regime of Benito Mussolini and the short-lived Salò republic. It is also the nation in which, during the immediate post-war period, fascists reorganized themselves into several different strands (which often interacted with each other): clandestine and terrorist groups (*fascismo clandestino*), veterans support associations, political activism through the infiltration of smaller existing movements and the creation of the most well-known European neo-fascist party – the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI, Italian Social Movement) (Mammone 2005, 2007). More recently, the country has witnessed the promotion of politicians who were prominent members of the MSI to ministerial and other influential political positions such as the mayoralty of Rome. This has coincided with the rise of the ethno-regionalist and xenophobic *Lega Nord* (LN, Northern League) which holds a

number of important portfolios within the current (and previous) Berlusconi administration. Alessandra Mussolini, the grand-daughter of the *Duce*, was first elected to the Italian parliament in 1992 for the MSI which then became *Alleanza Nazionale* in 1995. Mussolini left AN in 2003 due to disagreements with its leader Gianfranco Fini and created her own political movement – *Alternativa Sociale* (Social Alternative). This included other extreme-right forces such as *Forza Nuova* (New Force) and the *Fronte Sociale Nazionale* (National Social Front) and also had the support of *MSI-Fiamma Tricolore* (MSI-FT, Tricolour Flame). Her own party *Libertà d’Azione* (Freedom of Action) was also naturally a part of this coalition and was later renamed *Azione Sociale*. *Alternativa Sociale* was an attempt to federate the disparate archipelago of Italian neo-fascist movements and parties, a project which eventually failed due to their extremely fractious nature and that of the political personalities behind them. Despite this failure to create a single entity, these parties still routinely collaborate with each other. For example, Roberto Fiore, leader of *Forza Nuova* maintains strong links with Mussolini.<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, he also enjoys a personal friendship with BNP leader Nick Griffin. Fiore and Griffin were both active in the International Third Position and influenced by the Italian Julius Evola’s doctrine (Mammone 2011b: 408).<sup>4</sup> Griffin’s parents are also linked with an English language school in London owned by Fiore (Cobain and Taylor 2008).

Both the BNP and AS have a well-structured ideology which we argue can be identified as neo-fascist, with an authoritarian conception of law and order and a mythological representation of the past. These core values are synthesized in their respective mission statements published on the party websites.<sup>5</sup> AS can certainly be classified as a neo-fascist party for its professed ideology, its core values (tradition, family, motherland, race, work), its glorification of both fascist and neo-fascist icons and its identification with the historical experience and related mythology associated with the regime of Benito Mussolini. The neo-fascist label was not ordinarily disputed by the party’s leaders and supporters, a fact that would be hard to deny anyway given its public activities which included pilgrimages to the tomb of Mussolini and the commemoration of certain key historical dates from the fascist past. In fact, in 2008 after AN leader Gianfranco Fini made a statement about the value of anti-fascism, Alessandra Mussolini turned up in

parliament with a t-shirt bearing the slogan *Con orgoglio dalla parte sbagliata* ('Proud to be on the wrong side' – where the 'wrong side' was inter-war fascism). Labelling the BNP as fascist or neo-fascist, as many analysts have traditionally done, is now much more problematic. Griffin admits that the party comes from a fascist past but argues that it can no longer be considered as such because it opposes a large central state and warns of the dangers of excessive state power. He first used the term '21st Century popular nationalism' at the launch of their manifesto for the general election of 2005, a document which broke new ideological ground for the party. However, a number of scholars have tended to treat this evolution of the party's doctrine with a certain amount of scepticism. Nigel Copsey, one of the foremost experts on the party, has argued that 'neo-fascist' continues to be the most correct label and that the party's recent ideological positioning should not be taken at face value (Copsey 2007).

The extreme right in Britain, of which the BNP is currently the most influential component, traces its origins to the British Union of Fascists (BUF) led by Sir Oswald Mosley. This party had strong ties with the Italian Fascists and Chiara Chini (2008) has revealed the extent of these links and the funding Mosley received from the regime of Benito Mussolini. After 1945, Mosley collaborated with other 'orphans' of Nazi-Fascism such as Evola, the American Francis Parker Yockey and the Frenchman Maurice Bardèche. He founded the Union Movement in 1948 and attempted to modernize the Imperialist ideology of the extreme right by promoting a new pan-European vision of fascist nationalism through the development of the 'Europe a Nation' policy. This was based on the idea of a united Europe of the white race with its common values and superior civilization that would dominate and exploit the colonies still controlled by the Imperial powers of the continent. The international activism of neo-fascists such as Mosley, Bardèche and others such as Ernesto Massi – and the important contribution of the founding of the MSI – led to a series of international meetings such as those held in Rome in 1950 and Malmö in 1951. This led to the creation of the European Social Movement, an alliance between extreme-right forces in Europe and an early example of neo-fascist transnationalism and internationalism (Mammone 2011). In 1954 the League of Empire Loyalists was founded by conservatives opposed to the dissolution of the British Empire; this group was instrumental in the founding of the National Front (NF) in 1967

which for many years remained the main party of the British extreme right. The heyday of the NF was in the late 1970s when it regularly marched in the streets and often clashed with anti-fascists. By taking a much firmer line on immigration, Margaret Thatcher managed to neuter the threat of the NF and it entered the doldrums.

Today's BNP was founded in 1982 as a result of a split within the NF. For a long period, the BNP was considered by many as nothing more than a joke, a small clique of extremists with no serious hope of electoral success. Britain was often hailed as the only major Western European country that had no significant party of the extreme right which had essentially 'failed' (Cronin 1996). As Copsey (2004) explains, however, a modernization process was initiated from 1999 onwards when Nick Griffin became party leader. The Cambridge graduate attempted to modify the violent and threatening image of the BNP with its focus on 'activities' (street violence). Out, too, went the use of overt racist language associated with that old-style image; even the term 'race' was replaced by the term 'identity'. A genuine electoral strategy was then formulated based on grass-roots campaigning and exploiting local grievances. Such a strategy has been the hallmark of success and a tried and tested formula of extreme-right parties across Europe.

The MSI had attempted a similar strategy of legitimization with its *Destra Nazionale* project at the beginning of the 1970s, a strategy that was subsequently adopted by French neo-fascists in 1972 when they created the *Front National* (FN) (Mammone 2008). Griffin in turn used Jean-Marie Le Pen as *his* model to follow and the fruits of the party's modernization were already evident at the May 2002 local elections, when the BNP won three council seats in Burnley.<sup>6</sup> In subsequent local elections the following year they won seven seats there and a further six in other towns, and by 2004 the total number of councillors had grown to twenty-one. The party narrowly missed out on electing an MEP in 2004 (Renton 2005) and in the 2005 general election it contested 119 seats and won 192,850 votes, a huge improvement on the 47,129 votes it had gained in 2001. By 2010 the BNP was fielding 338 parliamentary candidates and received 563,743 votes, thus demonstrating consistent progress. It has however been unable to elect any MPs because of the voting system and the number of local councillors

it elects also fluctuates with the electoral cycle. In 2006 the BNP went from a total of 20 councillors to 46 and then in 2010 it was reduced to 19 representatives in local government.

### **[A] ‘Localism’ and Ethnic Competition**

There are a number of good reasons to study the behaviour of extremist parties at the local level. The first reason is that local elections, as well as second-order elections such as those for the European Parliament, offer an opportunity for small parties to come to the fore. The most emblematic case involving the extreme right remains the FN which in 1982 gained over 10 per cent of the vote in five cantons in local elections in France. From this first success, the FN steadily rose to prominence, culminating in Le Pen’s arrival at the second round of the 2002 presidential election. Such electoral successes are often the fruit of years of grass-roots political activity. Secondly, the deep entrenchment of an extremist party at a sub-national level may allow it to put into practice its political philosophy, promote community debates on themes that they consider crucial (immigration, public security), and even exert pressure ‘from below’ on national policies (see Veugelers in this volume). Martin Schain (2006: 287) has noticed how ‘decentralised structures – regions and municipalities – are reinforced by strong local party units and local *notables* to give these structures important policy-making roles. These structures, then, can be used as leverage to magnify the influence of the extreme-right in national politics’. This has indeed been the case for AS which, since joining the PDL, has given the party the opportunity to have representatives in local and regional bodies as well as influencing the political agenda at the national level. This is already evident with the current anti-immigrant climate in Italy as well as the creation of vigilante squads which have been encouraged by politicians such as Mussolini and the leader of the LN Umberto Bossi).

A third element to note about the local level is that these parties need to be selective about the seats they contest and therefore organize their often meagre campaign resources in a targeted manner. The BNP targets economically deprived towns in the north of England such as Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, which have significant numbers of South Asian origin Muslim residents. It also focuses on the East End of London, another area of ‘ethnic competition’ between different groups. In such places it is

more likely that voters of the so-called 'white working class' will take into consideration the possibility of voting for the extreme right (see also Goodwin in this volume). The electorate is also more likely to vote for such parties at the local level as a means of punishing the established parties for what they see as the neglect of their concerns. Nick Griffin acknowledged this in an interview with the BBC after the 2006 local elections, claiming that 'at local elections the public can let their real feelings out'.<sup>7</sup> However, in parliamentary elections, which are seen as more important, electors may be less willing to give their vote to a minor party with little chance of winning seats (particularly under the first-past-the-post electoral system).

By attaching itself to local concerns, the BNP has been able to become a respectable political actor in some areas of England, despite the fact that at the national level the party remains a political pariah. Indeed, it has been shown that many BNP voters tend to differentiate the party at a local level from the way in which it is presented nationally. Well-known members of local communities are often selected as candidates and as James Rhodes (2006: 18) noted, 'the BNP can gain legitimacy at a local level while still being labelled fascist nationally'. Extremist parties feel freer to express their 'true ideas' at the local level. Examining local election pamphlets often reveals stark differences with those used nationwide. The political message does not need to appeal to a wide and diverse electorate but can rather focus on the needs and fears of the voters who feel alienated and ignored by mainstream parties. One flyer produced by a local section of AS for the 2006 local elections declared that immigrants and gypsies (Roma) 'should be thrown into the sea!'. This came before the national backlash against the Roma in Italy (Sigona 2010) which subsequently gave Alessandra Mussolini the opportunity to declare in an interview that she would like to expel them all from the country.<sup>8</sup>

The 2006 local elections were an enormous success for the BNP. Whereas before these elections the party had 20 town councillors (and 4 parish councillors), they gained another 33 bringing their total to 53. The party received a total of 229,000 votes and averaged 19.2 per cent of the vote in the 363 wards it contested. In Barking and Dagenham (East London), it polled 41 per cent of the vote in the wards it contested compared to Labour's 34 per cent. The BNP billed these elections as a 'referendum on Islam'

in an effort to capitalize on the tragic events in London on 7<sup>th</sup> July 2005. The fear of Islam has no doubt helped to fuel support for the BNP, although it had started targeting Muslims even before 9/11. Due to the salience of public fears about terrorism, the party has shifted its attention to focus almost exclusively on what it sees as the threat posed by Muslims. In the party magazine *Identity*, Griffin (2006: 1) told his followers that ‘*this* is the threat that can bring us to power. *This* is the Big Issue on which we must concentrate in order to wake people up and make them look at what we have to offer all round’. In 2006, local elections also took place in Italy, although they were on a relatively small scale so it is difficult to assess the relevance of the results. For AS, these elections could not be considered as particularly successful as they failed to elect any local representatives and gained only around 0.6 per cent of the national vote (7,600 votes). Even if we ignore the fact that turn-out was low for these elections, it was of course extremely difficult for AS to make any kind of breakthrough because of the sheer amount of competition on the extreme right in Italy. The presence of AN and LN, which both draw large support and campaign on an anti-immigration platform, means that the potential vote of AS was naturally reduced. It also had to compete with the various other small extremist parties, thus compounding the problem, and this could explain the decision to join the PDL in 2009.

This does not, however, mean that AS represents an insignificant political force. Being part of a wider centre-right coalition has allowed it to influence national policy. In fact, in recent years its political discourse towards immigrants and other minorities in Italy has been adopted by mainstream politicians. Rather than electoral progress, as in the case of the BNP, this has been the major achievement of AS and in particular its leader Alessandra Mussolini. It does not find itself an isolated voice when it attempts to exploit public fears about immigrants, asylum seekers and Muslims. It is joined by other extremist parties as well as the governing *Lega Nord*. In fact, LN has taken the lead in the denigration of Islam in Italy which has been a key mobilizing theme in its campaigns. Roberto Calderoli, currently a minister in Berlusconi’s cabinet, has become a symbol of opposition to the building of new mosques in Italy. He has taken a pig for a walk on areas designated for mosque construction, thus symbolically desecrating the land intended for this purpose. Such ideas have been supported by Alessandra Mussolini who suggested

throwing salami and other kinds of meat made from pigs in areas where new mosques are due to be built (ANSA 2007).

### **[A]Nation and Tradition**

Ideologically, the nationalism that both AS and the BNP espouse can be included in the ideal-type that Ramón Máiz (2003: 261) defines as ‘organicist nationalism’, a concept ‘in which the nation is fundamentally defined by extremely determinist criteria which entails that the national community is internally homogeneous and exclusive’. The nation is thus envisaged as a natural entity that entails a neat distinction between ‘us’ – who have a historic attachment to the motherland, and ‘them’ – outsiders who no matter how long they live in the country, can never become real citizens. AS and the BNP emphasize the importance of national identity, and the pureness of the nation or community’s ‘soul’ displaying an almost blind faith in the superiority of the white race. This ultra-nationalist approach is not, of course, something new in the history of Europe. It was the main ideological bedrock of European fascism and post-war neo-fascism. It descends from the idea of a nation, and its deep virtues, located entirely above the individual human beings from which it is composed. This nation is perceived as a holistic unit in which the community is a collective actor characterized by its homogeneity. Neo-fascist parties emphasize the similarities, common traditions, roots and aspirations of ‘the people’ – similar to the holistic vision of the national community promoted by historical fascism. The BNP, for instance, states that a major party aim is ‘to foster and promote a feeling of national and cultural unity amongst our people’.<sup>9</sup> Correspondingly, following a clear neo-fascist tradition AS promoted what it called *italianità* (Italianess). The nation is associated with a community based on blood lines which shares similar values and belongs to a glorious and mythological past.

The importance of ‘tradition’ is paramount within this organicist nationalism. Party activists often believe in the central role of family values and are consequently opposed to homosexuality, pornography, and abortion – themes that were well rooted in the neo-fascist philosophy of the MSI. The family, for instance, is often represented as the imagined ethnic nation in miniature. The BNP boasts of the fact that

it is the only party to hold ‘family festivals’ and AS supports all policies and initiatives which they claim support the traditional family such as the Family Day demonstrations against the proposed law in favour of civil unions. It has also fought to maintain the presence of crucifixes in public buildings such as schools. This approach is perhaps unsurprising in Italy where the Catholic Church still plays an important role in national politics. The BNP, on the other hand, seems to view religion as a means of recuperating a lost cultural heritage even if churches in the UK across all denominations have always strongly condemned the party. Its literature is firmly rooted in a certain nostalgia for the past and as part of its local education policy it seeks to ‘press for the preservation or reintroduction of morning assemblies based on Christian worship, in order to ensure that children are not cut off from our religious and cultural heritage’ (British National Party 2006a: 10). It also intends to promote the celebration of the patron saints days of what it calls the ‘British family of nations’.

The importance of local traditions and heritage is closely tied and interweaved within their promotion of nationalism. This even extends to the promotion of local agricultural products. In fact, agriculture is, somewhat bizarrely, the first theme of *Azione Sociale*’s 2006 local election manifesto (Azione Sociale 2006a: 2). This seemingly innocent concern for local produce is explained in the manifesto as a means of economic protectionism against ‘third world products’ which are apparently damaging the local economy and causing potential health risks. In a similar vein, the BNP advocates giving schoolchildren one free item of fruit per day, ideally ‘a locally grown apple or pear’ (British National Party 2006a: 10). The primordial virtues of tradition and fatherland are supposedly able to counterbalance the perversions of modern life that are destroying the past and its sacred principles. This approach to modernity is reminiscent of Evola’s radical philosophy, but also the fascist ‘alternative modernity’.<sup>10</sup>

Extreme-right parties usually reject the authority of the European Union as it is an obvious challenge to national political sovereignty and economic independence. The BNP and AS are no exception, although Alessandra Mussolini’s party does not always call for the withdrawal of Italy from

the EU. However, it strongly condemns the idea of expanding the EU to include those countries ‘which do not have the traditions of European peoples’. This is the case with Turkey:

[ext]The absurd attempt to enlarge Europe – as if it was only a common market – to countries outside its borders implies a redefinition of the contours of our [European] continent. 3000 years of culture and history exist to remind us of what Europe is ... The entrance of Turkey into the EU would distort the cultural and spiritual homogeneity both of Turkey itself and our continent because thanks to the Schengen agreement it would give Turks the right to work in Europe ... In our view, the entrance of countries with clear Christian roots should be instead favoured. (Azione Sociale, 2006b)

The BNP has an identical approach to Turkish candidacy and European enlargement in general, but is much more explicitly anti-EU, denouncing what it calls the ‘voracious technocracy of Brussels’. This is even present in their local election manifesto, which claims that they will ‘challenge the diktats of the European Court’ with regard to corporal punishment in schools (British National Party 2006a: 9). Both parties also strongly criticize the economic liberalism of the EU and the free circulation of goods. They are actually in favour of economic protectionism, a classic trait of neo-fascism. This is in contrast to most right-wing ‘populist parties’ which now generally accept economic liberalism. By contrast both these parties oppose economic globalization which they see as leading to the loss of jobs back home and numerous other problems – most notably immigration.

### **[A]National Preference on a Local Scale**

In recent years, these parties have tried to promote an allegedly less racist version of their ideology. This is an intellectually elaborated reversal of positive discrimination, infamously described by Jean-Marie Le Pen as *la préférence nationale* (national preference). This implies privileging the ‘indigenous’ inhabitants of the country and the effective exclusion of foreign migrants and their descendants. This strategy was

influenced by the intellectual production of Alain de Benoist and what is known as the *Nouvelle Droite* (ND).<sup>11</sup> The ND replaced the classic theme of anti-egalitarianism with the idea of irreconcilable differences between peoples and cultures, thus promoting a right to be different. In the past, the BNP called for the repatriation of non-whites, but instead it now proposes the ‘introduction of a system of voluntary resettlement whereby those immigrants who are legally here will be afforded the opportunity to return to their lands of ethnic origin assisted by generous financial incentives both for individuals and for the countries in question’ (British National Party 2006a: 6). The same policy has been adopted by AN and, during a protest against extending voting rights to foreigners, AS supporters displayed banners reading ‘Let’s help them go home’. Recent literature produced by the BNP reveals an apparent softening regarding its approach to ethnic minorities, although membership until very recently was only open to white people. It even presents itself as a party trying to defuse racial tensions which government policies have inflamed. In an interesting twist, it condemns ‘equal opportunities’ policies as being racist:

[ext]The imposition of ‘equal opportunities’ quotas is both unfair on the majority who are discriminated against, and condescending to *capable members* [our emphasis] of ethnic minorities who are seen as having obtained jobs on account of their colour rather than their personal abilities. Council run ‘equal opportunities’ policies encourage racial tensions and deny the taxpaying public the right to have the best people doing the jobs for which we have to pay. BNP-run councils will move on from racist quotas and discrimination and become ‘Best Possible’ Employers, hiring the best-qualified and suited person possible for each job, regardless of their ethnic origins. (British National Party 2006a: 6)

As Roger Eatwell (2006) has pointed out, this is merely a tactic by the party leadership to defuse charges of racism by distinguishing between good immigrants and bad ones, the latter being especially Muslims and new arrivals. For the 2006 local elections, AS proposed in its electoral programme the principle of national preference:

[ext]Preference for social services run by the local authorities will be offered to Italian citizens ... we cannot disconnect the fact those who have roots in an area have contributed through successive generations to the creation of these services over the years. On the other hand, foreigners can obviously not claim the same rights to such services. (Azione Sociale 2006a: 12)

In the same manifesto the party launched a campaign against multi-ethnic classes in state schools claiming that children of immigrants slow down the education of native Italian children (this policy has also recently been advocated by LN through a proposal on 'separate classes'). In a very similar vein, the BNP's 2006 Council Election Manifesto opposed the teaching of minority languages to classes containing any native British children:

[ext]If minorities want to teach their own children their native languages, they should do so in their own time and at their own expense ... where foreign pupils have not achieved a satisfactory standard of English, they should be taught separately rather than being allowed to drag down standards and hold back native English-speakers. (British National Party 2006a: 9)

The language used to describe the national community differs slightly between the two parties. AS merely refers to 'Italians', although by this we are clearly meant to understand Italians of European origin. In the case of the BNP, in order not to risk the confusion of the label 'British' being applied to ethnic minorities, the pre-fix 'native' is generally applied and white Britons are even referred to as the 'indigenous peoples of these islands'. The use of such terms is a convenient way of avoiding being accused of overt racism. In fact, both parties are aware of certain constraints on what they can say regarding race and hence frequently encourage positions which are not explicitly racist but a kind of *Nouvelle Droite* inspired 'differentialist racism'. This represents a kind of intellectually elaborated positive discrimination and recognition of the *differences* between people. The BNP has shifted from a

focus on race to the defence of cultural identity, following the example of the ND. On the frequently-asked-questions section of its website, it is stressed that they do not hate other ethnic groups, in fact ‘they have a right to their own identity as much as we do, all we want to do is to preserve the ethnic and cultural identity of the British people’. This ‘ethnic protectionism’ leads to policy proposals which would be almost humorous if it were not for the seriousness of their content. The BNP states that on winning local power it will:

[ext]examine closely the licensing policies of the council in relation to taxi and minicab businesses to ensure that the ownership of such firms and the supply of drivers bears the closest possible relationship to the average make-up of the local population. This will also apply to other areas of trade where a BNP council has control of licensing including the sale of alcohol, market trading and late hours catering services. (British National Party 2006a: 6)

Such a proposal represents nothing more than an attempt to strip certain citizens in Britain of their jobs as these professions (taxi driver, market trader, take-away and local shop owners) are those which are stereotypically identified with immigrants and their descendents from the Indian subcontinent. Such statements are a typical expression of the doctrine of national preference. The BNP has always been skilful in manipulating local grievances in this respect. Their meteoric rise in Burnley was fuelled around concerns over ‘positive discrimination’ in favour of ethnic minorities and the belief that the town council spent disproportionate funds on those areas of the town with a large ‘Asian’ population. The 2006 manifesto promised that ‘different ethnic groups within the population will have money spent on them according to the percentage of the taxpaying population they make up’ (British National Party 2006a: 5).

Both parties display an obsession with multiculturalism and its supposed threats and/or failures. The BNP has waged a crusade against multiculturalism for at least the last 10 years. This was initially viewed as part of a Jewish conspiracy but now it claims that multiculturalism is one of the effects of globalization and that it wipes out indigenous cultures and identities through homogenization, presented

as a form of ‘cultural genocide’ (Copsey 2007: 74). The BNP never misses an opportunity to disparage multiculturalism which it describes as a ‘wicked social engineering experiment’ and openly claims that their recent success is based on people’s frustration with multicultural policies. In a televised interview with the BBC following the announcement of the results of the May 2006 poll, Griffin said:

[ext]There are genuine concerns about issues relating to immigration, asylum and multiculturalism and the British people ... are saying ‘we’ve had enough of the whole multicultural experiment, especially as it’s financed with our taxes without our consent’. (BBC 2006)

Such opposition to multiculturalism may be considered as surprising in the case of AS, as Italy is still struggling to decide over the possible introduction of official ‘multicultural’ state policies – and has not yet adopted any clear model of integration for immigrants. Nevertheless, the headline of one issue of the party magazine was ‘the failure of multiculturalism’ using Great Britain and the London bombings as proof of this argument (Landino 2006). Indeed, both parties promote a constant mobilization of xenophobia towards immigrants who symbolize people’s worst fears (social insecurity, criminality, unemployment) and are held responsible for a sense of crisis or decline. According to the section on tourism in AS’s manifesto, the number of immigrants who are working on the beaches has even damaged the local economy by discouraging potential tourists (Azione Sociale 2006a: 17).

### **[A]Conclusion**

This study has attempted to show fundamental similarities in both the ideology and local strategies of these two parties. The BNP and AS both promote xenophobia and exploit the fears of ordinary people linked to insecurity, criminality and unemployment. The themes of ‘crisis’, ‘decline’ and ‘fear of the outside enemy’ were elements that, albeit in a radically different historical context, contributed to the success of fascism. Both parties share values which have the hallmarks of the

neo-fascist tradition. The current crisis of legitimacy faced by traditional political actors and the distance which separates them from the people they represent, as well as economic instability and the threat of Islamist terrorism, means that parties of the extreme right have fertile ground for progression. The BNP in particular continues to break new ground, first by gaining a seat in the London Assembly in 2008 and then electing two MEPs in 2009 with nearly a million votes nationwide. The party still struggles to achieve the recognition it craves from the media although recent results are making *cordon sanitaire* tactics even harder to enforce. In October 2009, in the wake of the BNP's success in the European elections, the BBC was forced to invite Nick Griffin onto its political programme *Question Time*. The visual media in the past was extremely sensitive to the potential consequences of the BNP's message. In 2004, the party was forced to edit its party political broadcast and Channel 4 agreed to postpone the showing of a documentary they had made after police warned it could inflame racial tensions and contribute to BNP success in the local elections. Later that same year, the BBC aired its own documentary entitled 'The Secret Agent' which featured speeches which led to Nick Griffin and Mark Collett<sup>12</sup> being tried on charges of inciting racial hatred, although they were acquitted in both the trial and subsequent re-trial in November 2006. At election time the party still faces strong campaigns from parties across the political spectrum and anti-fascist groups, and its air time is extremely limited. However, due to the BNP's recent success, it is harder to justify the exclusion of Griffin and other BNP candidates from speaking on political programmes and other appearances in the media.

There was never such a campaign to limit the air time of AS and other neo-fascist parties in Italy, no doubt a legacy of the controversial relationship Italy still holds with its fascist past (Mammone 2006). Certain right-wing politicians still refuse to condemn fascism but are nonetheless selected as candidates for the right-wing PDL.<sup>13</sup> Alessandra Mussolini, due to the connection with her grandfather, is treated as a kind of minor celebrity by large sections of the Italian media. She was a regular guest on the reality TV show *La pupa e il secchione* (Beauty and the Geek), provided the voice for an episode of the Italian version of *The Simpsons* and is regularly invited onto TV chat shows and political programmes. This

could be interpreted as another sign of the crisis in Italian democracy (Mammone and Veltri 2010). Nevertheless, AS has of course merged with the PDL and Mussolini must now slightly tone down her rhetoric. In the Italian context, what is perhaps more disconcerting is the fact that politicians from the LN are not only often on TV, but also hold positions of power both in national and local government.<sup>14</sup> In spite of the evident differences of the ‘public perception’ of extremism within a democratic system, what has been shown here is that, despite the geographical distance that may separate them, extreme-right parties use an ideology and mobilizing themes which are remarkably similar, demonstrating a certain *transnationality* of political cultures. This is a reminder of the fact that we are facing a truly European phenomenon, just as inter-war fascism was.

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<sup>1</sup> An early version of this paper was presented at the 2007 annual conference of the Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism (ASEN) in London.

<sup>2</sup> This chapter was written before the official creation of the PDL but has since been modified to reflect this situation.

<sup>3</sup> When in 2008 Mussolini became an MP in Italy, she vacated her place in the European Parliament which was taken by Fiore. Indeed, they were both in *Alternativa Sociale* which contested the European Parliament elections in 2004, but at that time only Mussolini and Luca Romagnoli (MSI-FT) were elected.

<sup>4</sup> The National front and its current called Political Soldiers were also (at least partially) fascinated with Evola's ideas. It is worth reminding that Fiore was convicted in Italy for terrorism and spent many years on the run in the UK.

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.azionesociale.net> (click on *Decalogo dei valori*) and <http://bnp.org.uk/about-us/mission-statement/>

<sup>6</sup> On the BNP's breakthrough in Burnley, see Rhodes (2009).

<sup>7</sup> Video of the interview available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/4974870.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/4974870.stm).

<sup>8</sup> 'Ladri e accattoni, via tutti i rom', *La Repubblica*, 27 May 2007.

<sup>9</sup> On this, see 'The BNP: Defending Britain's Heritage, Traditions and Way Of Life' (British National Party 2006b).

<sup>10</sup> For a review of this concept, see Roberts (2009).

<sup>11</sup> On the transmigration of the ideas of the ND to Russia, see Peunova's chapter in this book. For a more detailed discussion of the ND, see Bar-On (2007).

<sup>12</sup> Former leader of the youth wing of the BNP who attended the University of Leeds (UK) at the same time as the authors.

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<sup>13</sup> Mussolini herself was attacked for her decision to join the PDL. Daniela Santanchè a former colleague in AN claimed that this decision would make Benito ‘turn over in his grave’ (Santanchè later also joined the PDL).

<sup>14</sup> On the racist approach of the Lega, see Avanza (2010).