

CHANGE ON THE ULTRA RIGHT

From 1975 to 1979 the National Front pursued a strategy unique on the ultra-right. It aimed to achieve political power, and to weld together its own uneasy coalition, through success at the polls. While the strategy, and the rhetoric supporting it, had been present in party statements in both 1974 general elections, the 1979 general election was widely presented as the ultimate test of the viability of this strategy.

The National Front put forward 303 candidates in the 1979 election, representing a considerable investment in campaign deposits alone. This, and the party's move to more business-like headquarters, while provoking some speculation on sources of party

finance, served to make the party credible as an electoral entity. Academic research also bolstered the party's apparent credibility, with one opinion survey predicting 25 NF Members of Parliament in an election based on proportional representation. As it happened, the trend away from the high point of 1976 signalled by the 1978 council elections was amplified to the proportions of an electoral debacle in the 1979 general election. Its candidates averaged but 1.6% of the total vote, the worst ever showing in a British election by a party with more than 100 candidates, and £45,000 went in lost deposits. Having presented it as the test of 10 years of political activism the lesson of the election seemed obvious to the leaders of the ultra-right.

The immediate effect of electoral failure was to shear apart the party's unruly factions. The NF itself fragmented into 4 groups: the Constitutional Movement under the former Deputy Chairman; the New National Front under John Tyndall, Chairman during the election; the British Democratic Party formed around the Leicester branch, the party's largest branch outside London; and the rump of the party under former Activities Organiser Martin Webster. Estimates of membership were recently put at 750 members of the CM, 600

members of the BDP, 750 members of the NNF, and 800 members of the NF (which claims 4000 members). As the NF disintegrated an obscure ultra-right group, the British Movement, began to achieve increasing attention. Its rise to prominence is indicative of significant and disturbing changes in strategy.

The British Movement was founded in 1968 from the remnants of the National Socialist Party, a tiny group of avowed Nazis led by Colin Jordan. Jordan was not electorally oriented, being content to await the call to power to save Britain from the Bolshevik hordes. His lieutenant, Michael McLaughlin, took over in 1975 on Jordan's resignation after a shoplifting charge. McLaughlin set about widening membership. After 1979 he was well-placed to siphon support from the collapsing NF and by the end of 1980 had nearly 3000 members in his overtly revolutionary Nazi party. This shift towards a group whose supporters are overwhelmingly young and working class represents the principal consequence of the Front's failure in 1979. The approach pursued by the ultra-right moved from electoral activity towards a 'militant, active and violent strategy for gaining power' (S. Taylor, 'Strategy changes on the ultra-right', *New Community*, 9(2) Autumn 1981). That this is not a consequence simply of the dissension in the NF is clear in the Front's pursuit of the same strategy after its divisions were, for

the present, resolved.

Several factors contributed to the mobilisation of youths behind such groups. Unprecedented levels of unemployment have combined with the re-birth of a skinhead youth culture. The recruiting policy of the British Movement and, later, the NF, was also influential, as was the growth of racism amongst the young, documented by recent research. There is certainly evidence of higher levels of racist behaviour at football matches, violence at concerts and attacks on ethnic minorities. However, it would be wrong to infer that such groups appeal only to the young working class. At least one study has reported widespread NF support among 14-19 year olds in a middle class suburban area as well as in communities with a tradition of racism. This suggests that the NF and BM are now associated with a developing sub-culture amongst the young generally, regardless of class or locality. The role of groups such as the BM in these activities seems clear; for example, the BM appeared to play a part in the worsening of race relations in Coventry in early and mid 1981. There appears to have been a significant shift of strategy on the ultra-right, a pincer movement deploying militant action on the one hand and electoral efforts on the other. Groups such as the BM may concentrate on the former but even the backlash caused by such activities can be used by electorally-oriented groups such as the BDP

to suggest that their intervention is required to manage the breakdown of consensus indicated by militant clashes.

These developments have projected young militant activists into a position of importance as supporters of ultra-right groups, and considerable attention has been paid to this trend. More neglected have been the implications of the strategy change for the former stalwarts of the ultra-right, older supporters and particularly those drawn from the traditional seat of the ultra-right, the lower middle class. One particular development seems significant in this respect. The less public ultra-right organisations, such as the League of St George, have increasingly given attention to programmes of civil defence and survival training, urged on supporters as necessary responses to the crisis in East-West relations. The older supporters are recommended to participate in programmes which reflect their now more marginal place in the movement and the declining importance of electoral activity. By suggesting attendance at survival camps, the purchase of protective equipment and guerrilla warfare manuals, the ultra-right puts before its older supporters a goal more apocalyptic than electoral success. It may be that the older members are being prepared both for continuing electoral failure and for surviving the chaos in which the younger members will more directly participate.

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