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The politics of hope: Global perspectives - London. PSA 2021 Belfast

Simon Parker

University of York

**#BLACKLIVES
MATTER**
VIRTUAL PROTEST

JOIN US IN THE
CONVERSATION AROUND RACIAL
INJUSTICE AND HOW WE CAN
COMBAT THE ISSUE WITHIN
BARKING & DAGENHAM

FRIDAY, 3RD JULY
6PM
VIA ZOOM

MEETING ID: 896 2679 5749
PASSWORD: 200344

SPEAKERS:

WEYMAN BENNETT
from Stand Up to Racism



Citizenship Futures



- This presentation draws on research conducted under the auspices of the ESRC/GCRF project Citizenship Futures: The Politics of Hope
- A comparative study of socially excluded populations in Paris, Mumbai and London including research teams from France (CNRS, Paris) and India (the Indian Institute of Technology , Mumbai)
- Th UK/London team include me (Simon Parker), Indrajit Roy, Nicole Lindstrom and Oznur Yardimci from the University of York (Depts of Politics and Sociology)

Barking and Dagenham



- Barking and Dagenham is an Outer London borough in East London, which lies around 9 miles (14.4 km) east of Central London.
- B & D has had a relatively stable, predominately white (and proud) working-class population. The famous Ford Motor plant was built at the end of the 1920s on over 55 acres of land, and by the 1950s it employed more than 40,000 workers.

The LCC and Mass Housing in Barking & Dagenham

- The Becontree site in Dagenham was acquired on behalf of the then London County Council in 1921-22.
- By 1935, with over 25,000 dwellings it was housing a population of more than 112,000 residents on a site covering four square miles.
- At the time Becontree was the largest estate of publicly supplied housing in the world.



Working for Ford



- Through seven decades, the Dagenham workers produced about 11 million vehicles.
- The successful Ford Machinists Strike of June 1968 which paved the way for the 1970 Equal Pay Act, but it took until 1984 for the women to be recognised as skilled workers by the company.
- Even as late as 1991, 40% of workers in the borough were in manufacturing but the Ford factory was mostly closed in 2002 (Asthana, 2010) and by 2019 only 1,763 employees remained at the plant, making diesel engines for export to the European Union and elsewhere.



The population of Barking & Dagenham

- As a source of relatively affordable housing with good and developing transport links with the city centre, B&D has attracted white and non-white working classes over the last three decades.
- Today, much of the borough is within the London Riverside area of the Thames Gateway zone and is the site of considerable house building and other development aiming to attract more middle-class populations.
- The white British population in Barking and Dagenham decreased from 80.86% in 2001 to 49.46% in 2011.
- Of the total population of 212,906 almost one in every five people in Barking and Dagenham is an EU national.



“Not my area anymore”

- Discontent among many in the white populations about the demographic changes in the borough is usually framed through strong ‘territorial’ ideas and expressions such as ‘this is not my area anymore’ and ‘we never see a white family move in!’. (Labour councillor interview 2021).
- The BNP exploited these fears by spreading a false story of a secret ‘Africans for Essex’ scheme, whereby the ruling Labour Party were providing Africans with £50,000 grants to buy houses in the borough. This was, their literature claimed, a deliberate attempt to gerrymander in order to buy future council victories.

Dagenham Patriot



The Voice of Goresbrook

LOCAL HOUSING SCAM?



The British National Party has been approached by desperate local families who are unable to get a council house, even though they've been waiting for years. So why are immigrants and asylum seekers who have only been here five minutes able to jump the queue? The council has replaced the traditional points system with a bidding system, but it seems the only people whose bids are ignored are those of decent local families.

The Labour party treat you with contempt: it's time you treated them the same way!

'AFRICANS FOR ESSEX'

Barking & Dagenham
Patriot 

BARKING - the way we were



From
this ..

■ The Barking & Dagenham Coronation Party in 1953 - the ladies of Barking.



.. to
this



■ Ladies in Barking today, thanks to Labour and Conservative immigration policy.

Is this what you really want?

The Breakthrough of the BNP

- The British National Party won 12 council seats in 2006 with 17% of the popular vote predominantly in the wards which had the largest numbers of long-term white residents.
- In the month before the election Margaret Hodge the Labour MP and Employment Minister had alienated her local party and council candidates by claiming that eight out of 10 voters in her constituency were contemplating voting for the BNP.

Political disillusionment

- “although seemingly unable to engineer a national level breakthrough parties such as **the BNP are able to mobilize support in local arenas that lay claim to distinct traditions, histories and cultures that render predominantly working class residents amenable to exclusionistic forms of political mobilization**” (Goodwin, 2008)
- The most important findings relate to why people are voting BNP, emerging out of focus group research in Barking and Dagenham. A widespread disillusionment with all the traditional political parties is found but this is especially directed at Labour who no longer represent their interests. This **disillusionment is specifically linked to immigration** – the dominant political issue in these communities.
- Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, 2005

And populist anti-politics



- The research grounds the popularity of the BNP in the material realities of the community – stretched public services especially in terms of public housing, economic insecurity and pessimism for the future. Immigration has come to symbolise a more fundamental belief in a deeper malaise in the country overseen by the mainstream political classes.
- Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust, 2005.
- In the Brexit referendum **62.8% voted in favour of leave** (a total of 46,130 voters) compared to 38% (27,750) who voted to remain. Turnout at 63.8%, was high by recent general election standards for B&D (source Guardian, 2016)

Moments of unity 1: Routing the BNP

- The election of 12 BNP councilors in a solidly Labour borough with a proud history of trade union struggle shocked the local Labour establishment and led to 'a changing of the guard' in the subsequent borough election (B&D councillor interview, 2020)
- Those committed to anti-racism and anti-fascism joined the local Labour Party or helped with canvassing and leafletting. In 2010 these seats had all been taken back by Labour.
- Unite Against Fascism claims that its efforts to unmask the BNP as a 'Nazi' party, working intensively on a door-to-door basis in parallel with the team of Labour incumbent Margaret Hodge, helped to alert wider sections of the electorate to the dangers of electing far-right candidates.
- The current leader of the council, Cllr Darren Rodwell, claimed that Labour reversed its fortunes by
 - Being visibly present on the doorstep and in community meetings
 - Being prepared to listen to residents rather than telling them what they needed

Moments of unity 2: the Barking Fire 2019

- A local councillor we interviewed gave the example of the Barking fire in June 2019 whereby neighbours of different faiths and backgrounds aware effective in saving lives and further damage to property.
- Private owners and social tenants joined together to demand action from the private developers to ensure the building is safe and fire-proof before they return.



Moments of unity 3: Covid Community Solidarity



Home » Community Action » Volunteering in Barking and Dagenham

Volunteering in Barking and Dagenham

Volunteering is a great way to connect to your community and help those in need.

Many volunteers have been working tirelessly to support vulnerable people in Barking and Dagenham receive food and medical supplies throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

There are lots of ways you can get involved and give back to the borough. From food clubs, libraries, befriending services, to donation distribution, apply today to help someone in need.

Through Better Impact you have access to guidance and support from our volunteering team, along with volunteering opportunities from different organisations, enabling you to get started helping your community as soon as possible.

- “At the outbreak of Covid 19 we pulled together our own [Citizen’s Alliance Network](#) of local voluntary, community faith groups who between them have contacted 25,000 people, delivered food parcels, medicines and messages of hope and support. This has important lessons for the wider Labour movement. You cannot do socialism to people – only with them.” Darren Rodwell, Leader B&D Council.



But most of the Covid support response has been from grass roots community organisations

- Across London projects working with vulnerable asylum seekers and migrants have remained open although drop-ins had to close due to lockdown restrictions
- Mutual Aid organisations were set up across the London boroughs to organize and distribute food and other essentials
- Facebook and other social media sites have been a vital platform for local volunteers to come together and for others to request help – e.g. Help Vulnerable Citizens in London During Covid-19
- Worth noting that to receive help from the local council in B & D you must not have local family to support you, have an existing community to turn to or be in receipt of statutory services.

Conclusion

- We cannot generalize about the experience of adversity and social exclusion. For some regeneration is a sign of positive social and economic change, for others it means higher rents and possible displacement, or the loss of shops and amenities.
- Generational differences are particularly marked in “white flight” outer London boroughs such as B & D which the Labour leader compares more to “red wall” constituencies such as Middlesbrough or Stockton. This is certainly reflected in unusually high support for Brexit compared to the rest of London. But note that 1/5 of the borough was disenfranchised in the referendum because EU citizens did not have the vote.
- We can detect signs of a “reinvented citizenship” but this has been a long-running feature of working-class communities that have relied on the pub and club as a community resource along with extended kinship networks (Young and Willmott, 1957).
- Increasing racial and ethnic diversity can offer opportunities for populist parties and movements to exploit a sense of loss and abandonment on the part of more established White British residents, but local political institutions, politicians and pro-unity urban social movements can build an alternative and more inclusive and hopeful “structure of feeling” (Williams, 1961) when afforded the opportunity.