

PWYLLGOR GWAITH CYMRU



WALES EXECUTIVE COUNCIL

AN NUJ members' rough guide to covering the BNP May 2009

Dear Colleagues,

You may have noticed that the European elections are upon us and in some newsrooms the thorny question of how to cover the BNP is raising its head.

As journalists we know the rules about covering elections and political parties and are guided by them regardless of our own political views or otherwise.

Many journalists rightly find the policies and ideology of the BNP abhorrent and would prefer not to have to give them any coverage whatsoever.

In particular, journalists who know the history of the BNP will know that the party traces its roots to the fascist National Front and other extreme racist and fascist far-right groups. We also know that - despite its attempts to claim legitimacy and respectability - the core leadership of the BNP and many of its supporters still hold to an extreme racist and fascist ideology.

Some of the most newsworthy stories relating to the BNP involve exposing the contrast between its attempt to portray itself as a respectable, mainstream party and the reality of its extremely unsavoury associations with Nazism and other repugnant ideologies.

An invaluable source of information for journalists about the real BNP is the organisation Searchlight and its Welsh offshoot Searchlight Cymru, whose vice-presidents are AMs from all four political parties represented at the National Assembly.

If you would like to look at this please go to either of these sites.

<http://www.searchlightmagazine.com/>

<http://www.searchlightcymru.org.uk/>

However, the problem at present is that in order to attract votes in a populist fashion they have hidden that side of their politics and try to present themselves as a mainstream party.

Some of those who oppose the BNP and what it stands for hope that ignoring it will make the threat the party poses go away. But journalists covering elections and day-to-day news don't have that option - the BNP are standing in elections and they have got elected councillors in some areas.

Moreover, many senior editorial staff are making it clear that the BNP has to be given proportionate coverage and will not allow editorial staff to use labels like fascist and racist for the BNP.

So, with this in mind, the NUJ in Wales has produced what we hope are helpful background notes and guidelines for NUJ members who have to cover the BNP.

Please feel free to pass them onto colleagues who are not yet NUJ members but who have faced similar issues.

AN NUJ members' rough guide to covering the BNP

Q - Surely, the BNP are a legitimate and respectable party.

A - A look at the party's history and the behaviour of some of its senior members shows nothing could be further from the truth. Go to

<http://www.hopenothate.org.uk/the-real-bnp/>

for a full account of the history and real policies and actions of the BNP.

Q - We are obliged under the rules guiding coverage of political parties to give them the opportunity to be quoted and so on.

A - Balance in reporting is important, but at the same time the BNP are prone to making wildly exaggerated claims which cannot be verified publicly. These should not be repeated as fact but made clear that they are claims. Similarly, anything quoted on their website and blogs has to be questioned and not repeated as fact - many of their claims for numbers attending meetings and support they are getting are not verifiable and so it has to be made clear they are claims.

Some reporters - given the pressure on newsdesks these days - may literally only have a few minutes to get a quote or information on the BNP. If you are put in this position, make sure you clearly state in the article the source of the information, if for instance you take something off a blog, website or previously issued press release.

The NUJ's guidelines on reporting racist organisations become more important as elections loom. Here's a few tips from the union's advice . . .

1. When interviewing representatives of racist organisations or reporting meetings, statements or claims, journalists should carefully check all reports for accuracy and seek rebutting or opposing comments. The anti-social nature of such views should be exposed.

2. Do not sensationalise by reports, film or presentation the activities of racist organisations.

3. Seek to publish or broadcast material exposing the myths and lies of racist organisations and their anti-social behaviour.

4. Do not allow the letters column, web forums or 'phone-in' programmes to be used to spread racial hatred in whatever guise.

For further material on the NUJ guidelines on

The NUJ guidelines are at <http://www.nuj.org.uk/getfile.php?id=388>

The union suggests that members print them out, circulate them and do their best to follow them.

Q - Our editor has told us that legal advice says we can't call the BNP Nazis, fascists or racists.

A - This has happened in a couple of media companies, and the BNP are trying to do everything they can to cover up their Nazi past and racist outbursts. Don't be bounced, however, into accepting a label for the BNP which you think doesn't bring out the character of the party. There are alternatives that can be used. The BNP are an extreme far-right party is one example.

Look around other media and see what descriptions are used. Also where space allows in an article it is possible to explain that some of the leaders of the party have been convicted of or are linked to racist and Nazi behaviour.

Q - But the BNP are a legitimate party, so shouldn't they get a fair crack of the whip like other parties?

A - Okay, all journalists realise they have to be covered, they have councillors and could possibly get MEPs, but if the BNP want coverage in this context then their record has to be put down on paper as well. They can't just pass themselves off as a protest vote.

Their policies and voting patterns should be put under scrutiny as well.

Q - But the BNP are picking up a lot of support and much of that support is disaffected voters from other parties who are not all racists.

A - Absolutely true, and this has to be reflected in coverage. But at the same time there are a lot of people who are turning away from voting for the long-established parties and they

are not all turning to the BNP. There are a lot of people out there who oppose the BNP and what they represent and that should be given fair and proportionate coverage as well.

Q - What if I don't want to cover the BNP or interview their spokespeople but I am instructed to do so?

A - It depends on the context but at some stage you will probably be asked to cover them and conduct an interview. In a situation where you feel uncomfortable about covering the BNP get advice from a union rep or full-time official.

There are health and safety issues about covering the BNP, particularly where they have organised a demo. The BNP is an organisation which appears to attract violence and no journalist should cover a BNP event on their own.

The BNP also organises events like their press conferences in a very cloak and dagger way which could find journalists miles away from their base and possibly out of contact. Some journalists have said they feel intimidated by the way the BNP organises these events.

If you do feel intimidated tell your news editor or editor and refer the matter to the NUJ as well.

Also some journalists who have covered the BNP have found themselves on sites like Redwatch because BNP supporters don't like what they have written. So, if you fear that the BNP could try and intimidate you in any way you could have a legitimate reason to refuse to cover the BNP.

Q - Have you any examples of why you think the BNP should be treated differently to other parties?

A - If you go to the Searchlight articles at <http://www.hopenothate.org.uk/the-real-bnp/> then you can find many examples that illustrate what we are saying here. And as a trade union member you should also be aware that the BNP are also anti trade union. When teachers, lecturers and civil servants were striking against pay cuts a few years back the BNP slammed them for being greedy! They condemned the firefighters strike in 2002 and criticised the one million local government workers who took action over pension cuts.

Finally, the BNP's attitude to women is just as backward if an ex-London BNP organiser comments are anything to go by. On his blog he wrote that "rape is simply sex" and that rape is not such a terrible ordeal. He also said women need to be hit a bit more to keep them under control. What was the response of the BNP leadership to these vile comments? To refuse to condemn them, saying they had been taken out of context!

- **If you have any comments about the BNP or the issues raised in this advice note then please contact NUJ Wales at info@nuj.org.uk or newmedia@nuj.org.uk**