



ALIEN NATIONS

In just over five years' time the London Olympics will officially celebrate the multicultural face of Britain. But in the shadows of the proposed new stadium, two popular movements with radically different views on immigration are rapidly taking hold. Nick Ryan meets the people and the politicians of the BNP and the Respect party, and wonders how long it will be before the area is torn in two. Photographs Simon Wheatley

Neighbours from hell: (above from left) Richard Barnbrook, homoerotic film producer and leader of the BNP in Barking and Dagenham; and 'Gorgeous' George Galloway campaigning on the streets of Whitechapel. Behind Galloway is Weisuel Islam, one of Respect's 11 winning councillors



★ The early hours of 5 May 2006: as most of the country sleeps, an extraordinary event is taking place. A bitterly fought local election campaign has just ended. Inside the glittering chrome of Canary Wharf, heart of the new East End of London, and in the fading Victorian grandeur of Barking and Dagenham town hall, ballot boxes are being emptied. Yet judging by the grim and anxious looks swapped between Labour-party officials, it is clear something is wrong. And not just in one borough, but across the whole of east London.

Decades of political status quo are being swept aside. Some of the safest seats in the country are tumbling. Long-serving councillors and political leaders are cast down, including Labour's longtime East End boss, Professor Michael Keith. But by what? In one case by a movement led by a friend of Castro, a figurehead for the UK's anti-war rallies. In the other by a Cambridge blue who once counted a nail bomber among his party membership. Both movements are propelled by a wave of popular resentment: over war, corruption, housing shortages and poverty. Each has supporters with strong views on sexuality; each lambasts Zionism. One is the party of the immigrant; the other bitterly opposed to them.

By dawn the next day, George Galloway's Respect – the Unity Coalition has a dozen seats in Tower Hamlets, while the British National Party (BNP) of Nick Griffin boasts the same advance in Barking and Dagenham. Each is now the official opposition in an area soon to welcome the 2012 Olympics. And each has risen as the east of the capital has undergone unprecedented regeneration and investment.

In the general election of 2005, 'Gorgeous' George Galloway – the maverick MP kicked out of the Labour party – had swept former Blair babe Oona King from power in the East End, overturning a 10,000 majority. Seething anger over Iraq propelled his campaign.

In May, I watch as he again rouses his troops for the local authority election, charming his way through the estates, hugging elders with their henna-stained beards, a roadshow of oddball whites in tow. He is all '*inshallahs*' (God willing) and '*alhamdulillahs*' (praise be to God), making promises to sort each and every problem with a '*salaam aleikoum*, brother'.

This is Banglatown, named after the Sylhetis from northeastern Bangladesh who have migrated here over the past 30 years. 'Banglish' (a mix of English and Bengali) is fast

replacing Cockney. Once known for the Kray twins and Jack the Ripper, the area boasts a £60,000 average salary. Nearly half the capital's commercial property development takes place here. But Tower Hamlets is still one of the poorest boroughs in the country: there is chronic overcrowding, high unemployment, crack and heroin 'shotted' even on Brick Lane, together with rising TB rates. This is a place where *mahram* and *purdah* govern the contact between men and women. The mosque – *masjid* – is the centre of life and the *ummah* (the worldwide Islamic brotherhood) the lifeblood of the community. And mosque and Respect are inextricably linked: through war. Not just one war, but an assault, as the community sees it, on the *ummah* in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Chechnya and Kashmir.

The day of the elections I also take my first walk through Barking in a decade. This is a place of white flight. Street corners resound with the heavily accented French of West Africa; Latvians, Poles and Russians chatter away in pool halls wreathed in smoke. Even Bangladeshi friends have begun moving here, following the age-old trail of Jews, Irish and others moving eastwards. Ironically, their East End ▶

◀ council flats are now selling for huge sums or are being used to house other immigrants. 'Fuck the BNP, man, they the old world, we the new,' one young African spits at me as I leave.

I take myself into Dagenham, a land of pebble-dashed, interwar housing and England flags, of West Ham. Racial tensions have been growing for months as an influx of immigrants puts pressure on existing economic and social tensions. It has become a housing mecca to Africans and East Europeans, a tide of people attracted by the cheapest private accommodation in London, in one of the most expensive cities in the world. Barking and Dagenham constituency boasts as its local MP a government minister, Margaret Hodge. It has been a Labour stronghold since the Twenties. A home to Ford motors, it is barely a stone's throw from Stratford, gateway to the Olympics.

On its website, the BNP says it wants a return to pre-1948 Britain: a world without the Windrush. The party still proposes voluntary repatriation for all immigrants. It includes many who think global capital and global economics evil. In London nailbomber David Copeland, it also included the first terrorist bomber of recent times among its former members. On the night of the local elections, an Afghan is stabbed outside the train station. His attackers are white.

6 May, and the media launches into overdrive. Most descend on Barking, where days earlier Margaret Hodge had committed political hara-kiri, claiming eight out of 10 of her constituents were tempted to vote BNP. Her comments, combined with BNP propaganda that Africans were being offered £50,000 grants to move to Barking from inner London boroughs (flatly denied by the councils concerned), and a foreign-prisoner release scandal at the Home Office, have proven disastrous for Labour.

Yet as the cameras roll in Barking, many miss the significance of events down the road in Tower Hamlets. May's crop of Respect councillors includes hijabis and Islamists, social reformers and idealists. At the centre of the coalition sits the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and famous names such as filmmaker Ken Loach. Yet each of the new councillors in Tower Hamlets is Bangladeshi in origin, each a Muslim. Not a single white member of Respect has been elected into office.

Dave Hill's house is large. An old sea captain's dwelling, it is a sepia-tinged place: memories lingering with the musty smell of age and the gentle tinge of dope. From here Hill has been plotting white revolution for most of his adult life. His family stretches back in the East End over two centuries. He attended Kray gang members' funerals and knew Charlie Richardson, the famous south London villain. Once he had been a minor drug dealer. Then he became the face and leader of the BNP's east London operation, the front man for its Families

Against Immigrant Racism network. Despite being recently expelled from its ranks for violence (a disagreement over missing funds), Hill still knows many people inside the local party networks, including new leader Richard Barnbrook, the man seen parading on TV after the BNP's success in Barking.

'I couldn't believe that!' Hill says of the election. 'I didn't know who was laughing harder: Nick, me or Gerry Gable [head of Searchlight, the anti-fascist organisation].'

Barnbrook is the poster boy of the 'new' right, one of the rare breed of graduates attracted into the BNP's ranks. He sits on its national committee. But as there have been no replies to my requests for interviews with the Barking councillors, Hill agrees to contact his friend Bob, a huge bull of a man, mouth crammed with glinting gold teeth ('care of the Metropolitan police'), who seems to spend much of his time in Spain. Bob has family in the Barking area.

With Respect sitting in opposition, I have come to their HQ in Tower Hamlets to meet Abjol Miah. A stick-fighting champion and former drugs worker, Miah is well known in the homes and masjids of Banglatown. A respected member of the East London Mosque, he is head of Tower Hamlets Respect. And he took the scalp of Labour's most powerful figure, Professor Michael Keith, beating him right in the very heart of Shadwell.

A year earlier, Miah had taken George Galloway across Bangladesh to meet its prominent political leaders and families. These contacts had, in turn, worked for them back here in the East End: it was not just the war, it seemed, which had won 'Gorgeous' George a seat. It was the extended 'village vote'.

'Labour is now petrified,'

Miah tells me. 'The conventional politicians think conventionally. I don't. I've studied that fella, wotsisname... *The Art of War*, Sun Tzu, and learned many battles have different objectives.' Miah's voice is soft-spoken, Cockney, but slipping easily into Sylheti or Arabic. Only in his mid-thirties yet a father of four, he is always on the road, at community events, up late at night talking with elders or plotting campaigns in his secret 'battle HQ', a friend's rundown council flat just yards from Cable Street, where Jews and Communists had battled with Oswald Mosley's fascists in 1936.

In his own words, Miah was 'a bit of a lad'. ▶



'I'VE STUDIED THAT FELLA, WOTSISNAME... THE ART OF WAR, SUN TZU, AND LEARNED MANY BATTLES HAVE DIFFERENT OBJECTIVES'

Local hero: (from top) BNP's Lawrence Rustem (left); and Abjol Miah speaking to Bangladeshi youths

◄ But that was in the bad old days of gang violence and the BNP. In his teens he began studying Islam, and his life changed. 'It shapes my character, my perception,' he says. 'It shapes my approach to other people. It also gives me a bit of humility,' he says.

His was a life defined by struggle – a struggle in which Respect seemed to play only a passing part. 'I was one of the first pupils to take my whole school on strike. Against racism,' he says. 'They couldn't provide safety. I used to go to school with shinpads, textbooks stuffed down my shirt. That's the way it was. Other people used to stash weapons, pick them out of the bushes when they came out of school. The front gate was for white people, the back gate for Asian people. I was one of the first people to get a prayer facility inside a secondary school.'

It is Miah's dream to see his faith extended; to see the Palestinian flag floating above Tower Hamlets HQ; to twin the borough with the West Bank town of Jenin. 'I think Muslims have the perfect role, a massive role, in shaping the moral fabric of politics,' he says. 'People in the western world have a great misunderstanding of an Islamic system. What is it? It's a system where people feel comfortable to live, they're able to worship freely... We're the biggest political threat. Not just to the current administration – but to the whole system at the moment.'

It is not until very late summer that I am able to meet with the BNP. I take the long walk from Dagenham Heathway tube station down to the Goresbrook ward. The old A13 cuts through the pebble-dashed surrounds. My first sight of Richard Barnbrook, councillor for the ward, comes outside a pub. Where the Respect men and women hang out in cafes and mosques, the BNP cloaks itself in the world of working men's clubs and drinking holes.

Barnbrook is dressed in a beige suit; relaxed, legs sprawled outwards, flicking ash from a cigarette. He has a nonexistent upper lip and button nose and a neat, old-fashioned haircut. An official councillor's badge is pinned to his lapel, an imitation-leather council briefcase clutched to his lap.

'I've been told about you,' he quips. 'They told me, you know, to be careful. That you know Searchlight.'

I ask how he is finding power. 'Power? Power, power... that's not a word I would

use,' he laughs, hard and flat. 'We can't even get business cards!' He counts off points on one hand: 'We've got third-party interference, we've got the unions and we've got Ken Livingstone's pet project, Unite Against Fascism [a pressure group linked, ironically, to Respect]. I've been approached by students, too, asking me how we go about campaigning. We know who they're really working for...'

Barnbrook maintains that it is simply hard work, canvassing and listening to concerns that won him office. It is the 'liberals' who are

misguided, not his party or the voters. And for the next few hours I hear of a return to the death penalty; the introduction of Sarah's Law (the BNP is obsessed with paedophiles); the need for traditional educational values; and for strong law and order. When I ask what he really believes in, he hesitates. 'I'm a nationalist. And I come from a social background. Erm, erm... Old Labour.' But not, he claims suddenly, a national socialist. He laughs nervously. 'No, no, I'm just joking! Ha ha ha ha!'

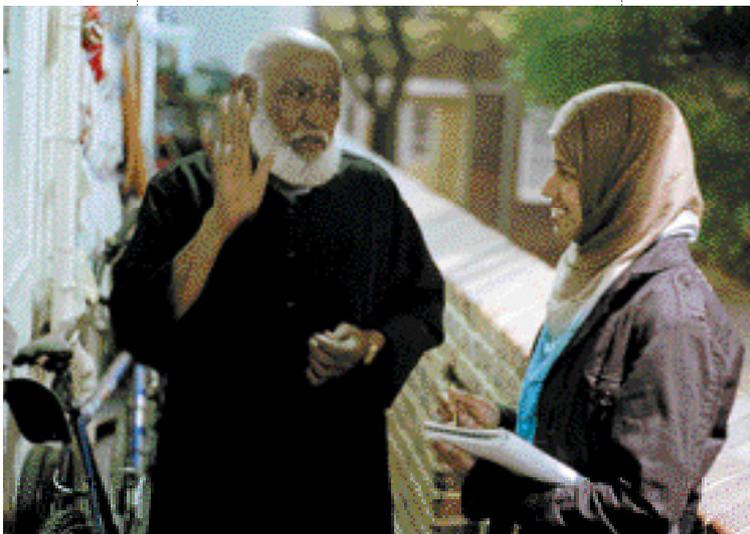
It seems a far cry from the life of a supply teacher, his most recent occupation. Indeed, it is a strange picture of his life that emerges. He only joined the party in 1999, he says, the same year Nick Griffin became leader. But the hostility goes back further. He talks of his mother being forced from her hospital bed in London to make way for 'people from minority groups. My father went ballistic.'

There is a sense of frustration, of dreams thwarted. 'I went to the Royal Academy,' he says. 'I started exhibiting, making money.' He says he taught around the world, making up to £100,000 a year. 'Then I moved to film,' he adds with a wave of his hands, 'worked with the likes of Stephen Frears, the Derek Jarmans, Tilda Swinton and all that. I even met Gilbert and George at a soiree once. Hence the "gayyy film"!'. (In 1989 he produced and directed a homoerotic film featuring naked men, scenes of flagellation and mutual masturbation. The same year, party leader Nick Griffin had vented outrage that gays were 'sick creatures... flaunting their perversion' when they marched in protest against David Copeland's nail bombs.) 'It was a film I had to make,' he says, 'for a European fellowship. I wanted to do a film on social issues. So I chose sexuality.'

Yet he now finds such actions disgusting. 'People in the party have asked me, "Richard, are you gay?" No, I am not. "Did you bugger people?" No, I did not.'

In early autumn, I return to Mile End to talk with some of Respect's old friends. Reverts to Islam. Gang members and drug dealers incensed by the wars on their 'brothers'. In the choking incense of a shishe pipe, an angry young man sneers when I say that Galloway uses 'inshallah' and other Arabic terms in his speech: 'He's like you, man, a replica of one of you! An old version with a cigar, yeah?'

So the new generation is already turning ►



I ASK BARNBROOK HOW HE ENJOYS HAVING POWER. 'POWER? POWER... THAT'S NOT A WORD I'D USE. WE CAN'T EVEN GET BUSINESS CARDS'

Word on the street: (from top) Respect councillor Rania Khan in Bow; and locals watch the World Cup

◀ from 'Gorgeous' George. Just a year earlier and they had been handing out leaflets, insisting the Scottish MP had taken the *shahadah* (Islamic conversion).

The next time I meet Richard Barnbrook, we have moved to Upney, and the giant white-washed surrounds of the Roundhouse pub. This time he is not alone. A pale, bespectacled figure sits alongside the beige-suited BNP man. The young man waves furiously at Barnbrook's smoke. 'Councillor Lawrence Rustem,' the reedy voice intones as he offers his hand. Lawrence Rustem: half-Turkish Cypriot, known to some in his party as a 'wog' but a dedicated adherent nevertheless. And now a Dagenham councillor.

I greet him in Turkish, 'Merhaba'. His face becomes stone-like. 'I don't speak Turkish,' the eyes flashing silver behind the lenses. 'I come from Hackney,' Rustem insists. He talks of a turning point in his life, when he was attacked by black youths while still at school. Now, he talks of 'faith in the flag, looking to make sure Britain remains in the hands of the people who should control, as opposed to George Bush and the EU. And any Tom, Dick'n'Harry from anywhere in the world.'

Barnbrook offers to take me to the surrounding estates to meet BNP supporters. There is a surreal atmosphere in Rustem's car. The two men argue as Barnbrook's dyslexia leads us to take one wrong turn after another. An Elvis figure jiggles on the dashboard; the King blasts through the speakers. As we pull off the A13 and pass into Scratton's Farm estate, Barnbrook calls out: 'Look, no litter! No antisocial behaviour, but these people are ignored by the powers that be.' A row of men sit by a single-storey, pebble-dashed social club. They are tattooed, one shaven-headed, with the sun glinting off gold chains, sunglasses and flushed faces. Friday afternoon has come early. As Barnbrook begins to hold court over the surrounding men, one man, a driver, states: 'This country is becoming a third world country... I've had to sell my council house to support my daughter. What generation wants to see that? It's shit, mate, absolute shit,' he says, spitting out that the Africans were 'going to their own churches, too'.

'You're effectively surrendering,' Rustem interjects.

'What else can you do?' says the driver. 'Stand and fight for your country, like your forefathers did,' Rustem smiles. 'As far as I'm concerned, fucking shoot the lot,' comes the reply. His friends nod. 'Burn 'em. Burn 'em. That's the way I see it. Why should we pay? Fuck 'em... This council 'ere don't give a fuck about no one. My father fought for this country, yeah; I fought to save my kids my house.'

The barman laughs and tells me how they refused entry to a Sikh mayor many years ago.

The place was going to the dogs and he was preparing to flee to the country. My last image is of Richard Barnbrook standing with hands on hips, lording over proceedings.

More recently, Barnbrook was spotted running from an irate member of the public after being overheard during a media interview stating that he did not believe in mixed-race relationships. Only a week later, he is also apologising for absences in council chambers, the party appearing to split locally. Soon, Gordon Brown will be promising to look at tougher race hate laws, after BNP boss Nick Griffin appears in court for calling Islam a 'wicked, vicious faith'.

My journey ends where it began: in the East End. As dusk descends on an evening during Ramadan, Arabs, Bangladeshis and Africans flow into the massive East London Mosque on Whitechapel Road. The contrast with the drab estates of Dagenham could not be greater. Change and wealth are everywhere. Tower House, the 'monster doss house' of George Orwell fame and a former junkie squat, is being redeveloped into luxury flats. The crumbling Old Fieldgate Street Synagogue, wedged behind and into the mosque itself, is a pale reminder of a former age.

That weekend, on Cable Street, a remembrance march passes for those who withstood extremists seven decades before. The cry of 'No pasaran!' – they shall not pass – rises from ancient throats. During Remembrance Day celebrations last year, Jewish war veterans were pelted with stones and eggs by Bengali youths.

As I walk back towards Brick Lane, I meet my friend Rupon, a self-confessed former extremist. We share sweet tea, surrounded by 'brothers' in an Islamic cafe. He knows most

of the current Respect crop: 'Islamists believe in the sovereignty of God,' he says, 'in every area of life. Before, they were rebels without a cause... now they have it: they believe in Armageddon. But they grew up in the East End when the BNP was here.'

Barely a mile away, the black Thames glitters. It links two worlds, and two radical movements, sandwiching the wealth of the City. With less than six years before the Olympics arrive, they wait – and watch. How long before they explode?★

Nick Ryan is author of *Homeland: Into a World of Hate* (£9.99, Mainstream Publishing)



'MUSLIMS HAVE A MASSIVE ROLE, IN SHAPING THE MORAL FABRIC OF POLITICS. WE'RE THE BIGGEST POLITICAL THREAT TO THE WHOLE SYSTEM'

Going to the dogs: (from top) a patriotic pooch; and an anti-BNP demo outside Barking Town Hall