

# White Riot: the English Defence League and the 2011 English riots

James Treadwell looks at the public order threat presented by the Far Right and at what fuels disorder

The English Defence League (EDL) is a far right social movement that claims to oppose Islamic extremism in England. Over the last three years, it has used street protest marches to demonstrate and draw attention to its cause. At many of these gatherings, EDL members have shown themselves to be more traditionally racist and have been involved with violence with counter-demonstrators. While the public face of the organisation has deliberately stressed its non-racist, non-violent character, the conduct of its core membership tends to belie the organisation's public image (see Garland and Treadwell, 2010).

In August 2011, in the middle of the riots, it was widely reported by the mainstream news media that David Cameron had described, 'some parts of our society as sick'. However, this was only part of his statement, which actually concerned the EDL, and concluded with the less reported observation that 'there is none sicker than the EDL'. This was said in response to reports that at the height of the riots in London, several hundred members of the group had gathered in Enfield and Eltham with the intention to violently challenge rioter's intent on entering those areas, even if ultimately they busied themselves throwing bottles at the police (Thomson, 2011).

## Individually and collectively

Cameron's position of course contrasts with February 2011, when he was roundly criticised for playing into the hands of extremists when he delivered a controversial speech

where he suggested the 'failure of multiculturalism' just hours after one of the EDLs biggest rallies. On that occasion around 4,000 EDL supporters marched through Luton. That demonstration passed peacefully, but several others have not, often resulting in public disorder (interestingly often in the same cities affected by the recent riots such as Manchester, Birmingham and Leicester). The protests of the EDL evoke the memory of how divided communities stoked by Far-right extremists formed the context that led to summer riots in 2001 in Bradford, Oldham and Burnley (Cantle, 2006). Indeed, when the EDL targeted Bradford for a large demonstration in August 2010 the comparison was most stark. Both individually and collectively, violence is often not far away from the EDL, whose disorder is underpinned by an explicit religious and racial hostility where 'others' from similar disadvantaged backgrounds are the target of violent hate (Treadwell and Garland, 2011).

During the recent August riots, far-right groups quickly sought to exploit public disorder for their own purposes. The British National Party (BNP) announced it would hold its 'biggest ever day of action' and distributed leaflets around riot affected areas titled: *Looter Beware: British defenders protect this area*. In London, the EDL claimed its supporters were organising across the country and would ensure a strong physical presence to discourage troublemakers from gathering in our town and city centres. The EDL's leader Stephen

Yaxley-Lennon claimed that thousands of EDL supporters would patrol the streets in towns and cities across Britain to 'protect' communities from rioters. While in reality, the response from the rank and file of the EDL was not the show of force that Lennon had predicted, a police fear that beer fuelled EDL vigilante patrols would emerge onto the streets was not wholly unfounded. It happened in Eltham and also occurred (albeit unreported) in a number of other cities (for example in Birmingham).

## Routine problem

Yet normally, far from being a force of stability, at regular intervals for the two years prior to the riots, the EDL has presented a much more routine and significant public order problem for police services the length and breadth of the country. While the recent riots have now eclipsed that concern, it should not be forgotten that the Far Right and particularly the EDL have been a significant growing public order problem in recent years, and have the potential to ignite even greater disorder (Garland and Treadwell, 2010).

Since their first small scale demonstrations in Birmingham in 2009, the EDL's had descended on a number of the cities and provoked and agitated, often creating a significant risk of inter-community disturbances. In addition, the cost of policing the EDL's demonstrations has continued to rise. The cost of policing in Leicester for one day alone was put at £850,000, and at that event a number of EDL supporters broke through police lines and came precariously close to making their way to one of the city's major mosques and a large-scale confrontation with Asian men.

The EDL's mixture of English patriotism, aggression and Islamophobia seemed to be welcomed by its target audience of the disaffected and the disenfranchised. Reliant on twenty-first-century methods of networking (such as Facebook and Twitter), and functioning in a world in which domestic football 'banning orders' and prohibitive ticket pricing make football a less attractive arena in

which to seek physical confrontation, the EDL has become something of a magnet for disaffected young males prone to resolving their grievances through violence (Copsey, 2010, Treadwell and Garland, 2011).

### Precarious employment

Yet as the context of this violence, in keeping with the riots, are the changes in the economy over the decades, especially the collapse of many industries that once supplied jobs to both the skilled and unskilled working class. Precarious employment is often at the root of social problems, and what is common to both the emergence of the EDL and the riots is that these manifestations of disorder occur at a time of massive and growing economic inequality where the super rich are enjoying unprecedented increases in their wealth. Even if there is no articulated grievance to this end, in order to understand both the riots and the disorder of the EDL, it is imperative to consider the socio-economic and cultural context. The leadership of the EDL has been clever in the way that it has tapped into the frustrations of a disenfranchised section of the White working class whose grievances arise from a dense tapestry of social, economic and cultural conditions and neglects, the consequences of which are still being played out – post 9/11 and 7/7 – as part of a global, national and local narrative with an increasingly explicit tone of cultural, religious and racial hostility (Mythen et al., 2009)

### Mobilising

It appears that the EDL had been very successful in mobilising such hooligan groups who had historically and often unsuccessfully been targets of recruitment drives of the far-right (Garland and Treadwell, 2010). Arguably, that ‘success’ has meant that it was the EDL who have posed the most significant threat to community cohesion in Britain in recent years. Feeling denied a legitimate avenue for their grievances; many EDL members articulated them in a spectacularly inarticulate way, turning up on the streets of major cities spoiling for a confrontation.

### Leadership rifts

More recently, the EDL has factionalised and divided as leadership rifts take their toll. Some amongst its hierarchy see the future as being the move toward legitimate politics in the wake of the collapse of the BNP’s vote and the bankruptcy of its finances. Others want to remain street based and become more aggressive, violent and extreme. There is some evidence that the latter group is winning. While the police arrest of 179 EDL members for plotting an attack on the Occupy London protesters encamped at St Paul’s cathedral in London received some press attention, similar violence against the political left in Newcastle and Bristol by EDL members has received less attention. EDL splinter groups such as the North-East Infidels do not yet have the numbers that rival the main group at its height, but they have ditched the ‘peaceful’ or inclusive rhetoric favoured by the EDL leadership and promote a much less tolerant ideology. The next manifestation of whatever follows the EDL may be more dangerous and problematic still.

The recent riots caused significant damage, and there have been calls to understand the factors that caused them. However, if we limit our attempts at understanding the threat to contemporary public order simply to a consideration of the August disturbances, we risk ignoring the alarming regularity with which the far right have taken to the streets in

towns and cities across the country. It also risks overlooking the character and nature of the far right as a continuing, on-going and evolving threat to both social cohesion and to public order, and the commonality of causation that for three years has been bringing members of the EDL onto the streets of Britain just as it recently seems to have done during the August riots. ■

---

**Dr James Treadwell** is a Lecturer in Criminology, University of Leicester

---

### References

- Cantle, T. (2006), *Community cohesion: a report of the independent review team*, London: Home Office.
- Copsey, N. (2010), *The English Defence League: Challenging our Country and our Values of Social Inclusion, Fairness and Equality*. London: Faith Matters.
- Garland, J. and Treadwell, J. (2010), ‘“No Surrender to the Taliban!” Football Hooliganism, Islamophobia and the Rise of the English Defence League’, *Papers from the British Criminology Conference*, 10, pp. 19–35.
- Mythen, G., Walklate, S. and Khan, F. (2009), ‘“I’m a Muslim, but I’m Not a Terrorist”: Victimisation, Risky Identities and the Performance of Safety’, *British Journal of Criminology*, 49, pp. 736–54.
- Thomson, A. (2011), Police clash with Vigilantes in Eltham, 11 August, [www.channel4.com/news/police-clash-with-vigilantes-in-eltham](http://www.channel4.com/news/police-clash-with-vigilantes-in-eltham)
- Treadwell, J. and Garland, J. (2011), ‘Masculinity, Marginalization and Violence: A Case Study of the English Defence League’, *British Journal of Criminology*, 51 (4), pp. 621–634.

