

Multiculturalism and the Extreme Right Challenge in Contemporary Britain

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Riots in several localities in Northern England in 2001 (Oldham, Burnley and Bradford) involving South Asian youth of Muslim origin represented a defining moment in the history of British multiculturalism. The previous year, the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain had published a major report (the so-called Parekh report) which offered a vision of Britain as an outward-looking community at ease with multicultural diversity.¹ In the wake of the riots, however, British multiculturalism stood accused of fostering ethnic conflict. Through a process of neighbourhood self-segregation, multicultural practice in Britain had supposedly encouraged ethnic minorities and South Asian Muslims in particular, to lead ‘parallel lives’. According to Commission for Racial Equality Chair, Trevor Phillips, multicultural Britain had been ‘sleepwalking into segregation’ (Phillips, 2005). Significantly, at the local level, amongst deprived white neighbourhoods, the failure to engage the white working-class in the multicultural project fed a toxic narrative. This narrative portrayed whites as the victims, losing out to Muslim communities who were supposedly the beneficiaries of preferential treatment. Resentment from ‘white-have-nots’, dubbed ‘white backlash’ by sociologist Roger Hewitt (2005), which was targeted above all at South Asian Muslims, was further exacerbated by post 9/11 and 7/7 evaluations of Muslims as either apologists for terror or potential terrorists. The growing receptiveness of British society to the idea that multiculturalism had ‘failed’, when tied

inextricably to the widespread belief that Muslims and Islam are fundamentally incompatible with Western society, created an ideal climate in which Britain's extreme right garnered strength.

At first, this found expression in the growing number of votes cast for the far-right British National Party (BNP), which between 2001 and 2010 was the most significant British far-right organisation. In the 2001 general election the BNP had captured just over 47,000 votes; in the 2010 general election its total vote had exceeded half a million. More recently, though, support for the BNP has been on the wane and it has been the English Defence League (EDL), a street-activist group that mobilised support around virulent hostility to Islam, which stole its limelight (Copsey, 2010; Jackson, 2011). This chapter will examine the 2001 disturbances and the electoral emergence of the BNP in the wake of these disturbances. To what extent did British multiculturalism give rise to white working-class resentment? How far has the BNP benefited? Does the recent collapse in BNP electoral support confirm that the threat from the extreme right has now receded? What of the English Defence League? Rather than presenting a threat at the ballot box, is the current extreme right challenge in Britain situated elsewhere - in a violent far-right fringe set on the destruction of Britain's multicultural society?

THE 'FAILURE' OF MULTICULTURALISM

On the very same day that the English Defence League held a major demonstration in Luton, British Prime Minister David Cameron, stated publicly (and to an international audience) that British multiculturalism had 'failed'. Speaking in February 2011 at a security conference in Munich, Cameron declared that 'under the doctrine of state multiculturalism' Britain had 'encouraged different cultures to live separate lives apart from each other and apart from the mainstream'.² In Britain, the doctrine of 'state multiculturalism', if such a 'doctrine' exists, is decentralised, evident more at the local level with regard to the provision of social services and education than at the national level (see Joppke, 2004). This form of 'state multiculturalism' arose, particularly so at local authority level, in response to what cultural theorist Stuart Hall has

called ‘multicultural drift’ – the day-to-day reality of Britain finding itself ‘stuck in the middle of a multiculturalist situation from which there was no return, and which it came, reluctantly, to accept’ (Carrington, 2008, p. 117).

Cameron’s critique of multiculturalism was nothing new. In fact Cameron merely rehashed what he had already said in 2008 when declaring that multiculturalism had been deliberately ‘manipulated’ in order ‘to entrench the right to difference’.³ In other words, the British practice of multiculturalism, by over-valuing difference, had served to promote division. For Cameron, the introduction of Sharia law for Muslims (the second largest faith community in Britain) would constitute ‘the logical endpoint of the now discredited doctrine of state multiculturalism’.⁴ If in 2008 it had become acceptable for a senior political figure to reproach multiculturalism, seven years earlier, the Conservative Party hierarchy (anxious to portray itself as a ‘modern’ and ‘progressive’ party) had been deeply embarrassed when, during the 2001 general election campaign, former Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher had vented her frustration to one journalist that, ‘I don’t wish to have what they call a multicultural society. I hate these phrases. Multicultural society! A multicultural society will never be a united society!’⁵ So what had happened during the intervening period? What had occasioned a backlash against multiculturalism amongst Britain’s political elite?

One point that needs to be made here is that the British political elite lacked profound commitment to the idea of ‘state multiculturalism’ in the first place. With ‘multi-cultural drift’, the embrace of ‘state multiculturalism’ was always more pragmatic, opportunistic, and rhetorical than sincere or profound. In part this explains the ease of the ‘retreat from multiculturalism’ (Carrington 2008, p. 117). Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the critical importance of *events*. During the spring and summer of 2001, the Lancashire ‘mill towns’ of Oldham and Burnley, and the West Yorkshire city of the Bradford experienced serious racial disturbances – in the case of Bradford, the worst riots in Britain since the 1980s. In Oldham, around 200 South Asian youth of Pakistani origin rioted over the weekend of 26-27 May 2001. Several weeks later,

a similar episode saw the neighbouring town of Burnley endure violent clashes between Pakistani and white youths. Then, over the weekend of 7-8 July 2001, the city of Bradford saw hundreds of Pakistani youths clash with whites. In Oldham, Burnley and Bradford, the presence of the extreme right, and in particular the BNP, had been a key factor in precipitating the riots (although the official response to these riots failed to identify the extreme right presence as an important aggravating factor). In all three localities the far-right BNP reaped electoral benefits: in Oldham, in June 2001, the BNP scored its highest ever vote in a British general election to date, capturing over 16 per cent of the vote in one Oldham constituency; in Burnley, by 2003, the BNP could boast eight local council seats; and in Bradford, the BNP established a foothold in the city in 2004 when it captured four local council seats.

Rather than seeing their cause in the provocations of the far right, what emerged as a consequence of these disturbances was an official discourse that understood their cause in terms of ethnic segregation and community division. The received wisdom was that the disturbances had been brought about by a ‘depth of polarisation’ between segregated communities living ‘a series of parallel lives’ (see Burnley Task Force Report, 2001; Oldham Independent Review, 2001; Bradford Vision, 2001). What was needed, therefore, was a new model of integration – ‘community cohesion’ – that emphasised a need for social solidarity and social interaction between ethnic groups at local level, which would, in turn, create an integrated whole (see Cantle, 2001). Although multiculturalism was not explicitly singled out as the cause of the disorder in the reports themselves (Rattansi, 2011, pp. 74-75), the argument for greater integration suggested that British multicultural practice required a thorough re-think. As a result, by 2004 there was increasing acceptance across mainstream opinion (including the progressive left) that rather than encouraging integration, British multiculturalism had, in fact, encouraged social fragmentation. In April 2004, in a hugely important symbolic move, Trevor Phillips, Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) called on the Labour government to end its support for multiculturalism. That Trevor Phillips (Britain’s black ‘race relations’ supremo) had made this call

revealed the extent to which multiculturalism had fallen from favour. Up till then the CRE had always been regarded as a bastion of multicultural orthodoxy.

Phillips' call had acquired greater potency in July 2005 after several home-grown Islamist terrorists carried out suicide bombings in London. Right-wing journalist, Melanie Phillips, in her controversial book *Londonistan* (2006, p. viii) summed up the popular mood:

The attacks had been carried out by home-grown Muslim terrorists, suburban boys who had been educated at British schools and had degrees, jobs and comfortable families. Yet these British boys, who loved cricket and helped disabled children, had somehow been so radicalized within the British society that had nurtured them that they were prepared to murder their fellow citizens in huge numbers and turn themselves into human bombs to do so.

An appalling vista thus opened up for Britain, which has around two million Muslim citizens out of a population of some sixty million. How many more Muslim youths, people wondered, might similarly be planning mass murder against their fellow Britons?

In the weeks that followed, as Tariq Modood (2005) noted, there was an outpouring of negative commentary on British multiculturalism. Spanning the left-right spectrum, political columnist William Pfaff, argued in the liberal *Observer* newspaper that 'these British bombers are a consequence of a misguided and catastrophic pursuit of multiculturalism'; Martin Wolf, writing in the *Financial Times*, demanded that 'multiculturalism must be discarded as nonsense'; Shadow Tory Home Secretary David Davis called on the government to scrap its 'outdated' policy of multiculturalism; and in September 2005 Trevor Philips (2005) intervened once more, calling for a balance to be 'struck between an "anything goes" multiculturalism on the one hand, which leads to deeper division and inequality; and on the other, an intolerant, repressive uniformity'.

‘We have allowed’, Phillips continued, ‘tolerance of diversity to harden into the effective isolation of communities, in which some people think special separate values ought to apply’. Finally, in 2006 the Labour government signalled its formal retreat from multiculturalism when Ruth Kelly (2006), the Labour Government’s Communities Secretary declared that Britain had moved away from ‘a period of uniform consensus’ on multiculturalism.

If there was already recognition that the spatial and social segregation of established minority communities was a pressing problem, particularly so in the case of established Muslim communities, two unprecedented waves of new migration further added to popular anxieties. The first wave came in the form of asylum-seekers; the second wave took the form of European Union (EU) migrants. Asylum applications had increased dramatically from over 4,000 in 1987 to a peak of over 84,000 in 2002 when asylum applicants and their dependents accounted for 49 per cent of net migration to Britain (Blinder, 2011). A media panic ensued in which asylum-seekers were stigmatised as ‘bogus refugees’ – supposedly motivated more by economic gain than by any genuine fear of persecution. With Muslim countries constituting some of the leading sources of asylum applicants (Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia), there was also a conflation of asylum and Islam in the popular imagination. Moreover, from 2004 onwards, the arrival of hundreds of thousands of migrants from the new EU accession states, even if many shared a common European Christian heritage, called further attention to the fact that Britain had become far more diverse than ever before. The word that was bandied about now was “super-diversity”. Yet as Rattansi (2011, p. 146) has observed, “super-diversity” at local level ‘put a particular strain on housing, schools, and the health service in some areas, allowing the Far Right an opportunity to intensify anti-immigrant sentiments’.

What is important here, as James Rhodes (2011, p. 69) has already acknowledged, is that the far right located itself ‘within a broader oppositional culture towards the politics of multiculturalism’ - a culture in which organisations like the BNP appeared less extreme than they did prior to 2001. In other words, with multiculturalism giving cause for criticism amongst the

establishment, the extreme right was given space to position its own critique of multiculturalism within mainstream discourse (rather than in total opposition to it). In so doing, Britain's extreme right was able to construct some semblance of legitimacy, particularly so at local level. A key factor in this respect had been the emergence of a parallel narrative amongst white working-class communities that their needs were neglected because the needs of ethnic minorities, and in particular Muslims, were being prioritised. In the wake of the 2001 riots the CRE had already warned the Labour government of growing resentment amongst the white working-class associated with the belief that ethnic minorities received preferential treatment and unequal access to resources. In reality, there was little truth in claims that white communities were being deliberately disadvantaged. However, given the lack of cross-cultural contact between communities such a view tapped into a polarised sense of 'them and us'. Significantly, as we shall see, an emotionally-charged white resentment encouraged a growing trend to vote for the BNP, particularly across Labour-run local authorities. The BNP message – that working-class whites were being discriminated against by a local Labour establishment that took their votes for granted whilst pandering to the ethnic minority vote – chimed with this angry mood of white betrayal and injustice. Across numerous disadvantaged white neighbourhoods, first in North-West England and then spreading out elsewhere, the BNP was able to take 'ownership' of working-class 'white backlash'.

AT THE BALLOT BOX: THE ELECTORAL RISE OF THE BRITISH NATIONAL PARTY

The BNP was originally formed in 1982 as an offshoot from the National Front (NF). The National Front – still in existence today, although of less significance than the BNP - is a far-right anti-immigrant party that during the 1970s experienced a surge in popular support, polling nearly a quarter of a million of votes in local elections in 1977 (although it never won any seats in

local elections or, for that matter, any seats in any parliamentary elections) (see Taylor, 1982).

The early electoral history of the BNP, led until 1999 by veteran hardliner John Tyndall, was unremarkable. Between 1982 and 1999, the highest BNP vote share in a general election was a mere 0.1 per cent (in 1997). However, the BNP did capture newspaper headlines for a very brief moment in 1993 when, by projecting itself as a champion of local white residents, campaigning around a theme of ‘rights for whites’, it captured a local council seat in a ward in East London.

Although this victory did not herald a national breakthrough - the BNP lost this solitary council seat following a strong anti-fascist mobilisation – it served as a model campaign for the party’s ‘modernisers’. The ‘modernisers’ looked to build broader support for the BNP through a strategy of embedded neighbourhood politics, through establishing intimate contact with local white voters on the doorstep and by projecting the party as a legitimate defender of local white interests (see Smith, 1998). This meant dispensing with provocative street demonstrations which, in any case, invited the attention of anti-fascist militants and merely reinforced impressions that the BNP was not a normal political party but an extremist organisation intent on violence.

Nick Griffin, who succeeded John Tyndall as BNP leader in 1999, wanted the BNP to embrace the ‘community politics’ strategy that the party’s modernisers had called for: to mainstream the BNP through an embrace of local community politics and doorstep contact with voters. The strategy was intended to counter the image of ‘sieg-heiling’ skinheads by presenting the party, on the doorstep, in a non-threatening way. The idea was to create ‘cognitive dissonance’ amongst voters, that is, a gap between expectation (thuggery) and reality (a smartly dressed canvasser). For the ‘modernisers’, doorstep canvassing represented the ‘trump card’: it established intimate contact on people’s doorsteps, worked to counteract the BNP’s negative image, and demonstrated that the BNP was listening to the concerns of ordinary white voters who felt abandoned and forgotten by an out-of-touch national and local political establishment. At the same time, the BNP abstained from the type of violent street activity that characterised the NF in its 1970s hey-day. The idea was to disarm militant anti-fascists and remove the BNP’s

traditional association with the swastika and the jackboot (see Copsey, 2011). Griffin's line was that the BNP had to clean up its image, distance itself from Nazism/Fascism and turn itself into an electable party that presented its policies in more moderate 'mainstream' light. This did not mean abandoning core principles but meant talking in non-threatening language which the public felt comfortable with. The focus would be on four 'idealistic, unobjectionable, motherhood and apple pie concepts' (all lifted from the French *Front National*): 'Freedom, Democracy, Security and Identity' (Copsey, 2008, p. 103).

Under Griffin, the BNP then endeavoured to re-brand itself as a modern, 'popular nationalist' party. Griffin dropped the NF-style call for the forced repatriation of non-whites. He declared that an all-white Britain was now an unrealistic 'utopia' (Griffin realised that forced repatriation was a vote-loser). Nonetheless, even if he was prepared to accept that the BNP could not return Britain to the 'status quo ante 1948' (BNP 2005, p. 20), that is to say, return Britain to an era before mass immigration, Griffin remained committed to the overarching principle of a white Britain (albeit with some 'salt in the soup', in other words, the presence of some non-whites in British society). Secondly, he redefined the party as a party of 'ethno-nationalism' rather than a party of '100 per cent white racial nationalism'. The BNP now referred to its principles as 'ethno-nationalist', that is to say, the British nation was comprised of several 'indigenous' ethnic groups (Anglo-Saxons, Celts, Norse folk communities, and so on) and that these 'indigenous' or 'ancestral' ethnic groups have a right to self-determination in their own territory. 'Being British is more than merely possessing a modern document known as a passport', the BNP's 2010 general election manifesto explained, 'It runs far deeper than that: it is to belong to a special chain of unique people who have the natural law to remain a majority in their ancestral homeland' (BNP, 2010, p. 23). Inspired by the ideas of the European New Right, Griffin's BNP borrowed from the discourse of multiculturalism - the 'right to difference' - and argued that the ethnic British had the right to retain their own traditions, culture, heritage and identity without being overwhelmed, threatened or dominated by any other ethnic group (see

Copsey, 2013). The BNP was quick to deny that it was a white supremacist party: ‘All peoples, all races, have a right to equal dignity and respect’, Griffin’s BNP claimed, ‘and it is morally incorrect to regard any individual as “inferior” simply because of their racial origin. Any position or argument using that premise’, it continued, ‘is morally bankrupt as well as politically “unsellable”’.⁶

Instead of explicitly campaigning against Britain’s multi-racial/multicultural society in its entirety, which would only draw accusations of racism and so alienate potential voters, Griffin’s BNP now concentrated its fire on a religious creed: Islam. Although multiculturalism was still understood by the BNP in terms of a racial threat,⁷ the BNP focused on multiculturalism as a ‘religious’ and ‘cultural’ threat, and singled out Muslims as the most visible and threatening manifestation of multiculturalism. According to Griffin, the bombing of the World Trade Center ‘didn’t just kill some 6,000 people, it also killed multiculturalism’:

Gone is fantasy that multiculturalism could be imposed on diverse peoples without creating a fundamental clash of attitudes, interests and ways of life. Gone is the notion that it is possible to import vast numbers of unassimilable foreigners without also importing their quarrels and hatreds. And gone is the naïve belief that Islam is just another religion, or that you can bring large number of its followers into the West without bringing with them the undemocratic, sectarian and confrontational attitudes which are so deeply ingrained in their Holy Book (Griffin, 2001, p. 4).

In the wake of 9/11 the BNP widely distributed a leaflet entitled ‘The Truth about **I.S.L.A.M**’ with **I.S.L.A.M** an acronym for ‘**I**ntolerance, **S**laughter, **L**ooting, **A**rson and **M**olestation of women’. Following the 7/7 London bombings it distributed a leaflet that carried an aerial photograph of the bus ravaged by one of the London bombs, along with the slogan ‘maybe now it is time to start listening to the BNP’. In February 2006 Griffin courted publicity after his

acquittal of incitement to racial hatred (following comments that he had made in 2004 that Islam was ‘an evil, wicked faith’); the following month he boasted that the BNP was poised to ‘very firmly benefit’ from the ‘ever growing popular concern about the rise of Islam’ (James, 2009, p. 6).

The BNP had dubbed the 2006 local elections a ‘referendum on Islam’. It was a breakthrough moment. In local elections in 2002 the BNP had captured three seats in Burnley; the following year its tally of councillors had increased to 13, rising further to 21 in June 2004. But it was at the 2006 local elections, when the BNP captured a further 33 seats, that the BNP recorded its most significant electoral breakthrough to date: in Barking and Dagenham in outer East London, the BNP became the first extreme-right party in British history to form the official opposition in a local council chamber. Following local elections in 2008 the BNP held 55 councillors across 22 local authorities. A seat in the Greater London Assembly elections was also won in May 2008, followed in June 2009 by the addition of three county council seats. By far its most significant electoral breakthrough, however, was the capture of two seats in the European Parliament in June 2009 when Griffin and fellow veteran far-right activist, Andrew Brons, were elected MEPs for the North West and Yorkshire and Humber regions respectively. In the June 2009 European elections the BNP had polled close to a million of votes (943,598). Never before had a British far-right party broken through in a national election. The BNP seemed on the verge of entering the political mainstream. Griffin was given a prime (although deeply controversial) slot on the BBC’s flagship current affairs programme, *Question Time* in October 2009, which attracted over eight million viewers (see Copsey and Macklin, 2011). BNP membership was up to a record high of 12,632 by the end of December 2009. For Nick Griffin, 2009 had been the year that had witnessed ‘the British National Party’s biggest ever political and public recognition breakthrough’.⁸ The party, it seemed, was scaling new heights.

So what explained its electoral rise? For sure, concerns over the immigration issue had played a crucial role in mobilising the BNP vote. According to opinion poll data under 5 per cent

of voters had placed immigration in their top two or three issues of domestic concern in 1997. In 2001 this figure stood at 19 per cent; by 2007 it stood at over 40 per cent (see Messina, 2011, p. 178). Research on BNP support confirmed that its vote had been primarily driven by opposition to immigration - 87 per cent of BNP supporters in a poll carried out in 2009 identified immigration as one of the most pressing issues facing Britain, and 79 per cent agreed that Islam, even in its mildest form, posed a serious danger to Western civilisation (see Goodwin, 2011, pp. 110-11). The significance of anti-Muslim attitudes as a driver of BNP support was further emphasised by the fact that the BNP had polled strongest in areas with large Muslim, particularly Pakistani and Bangladeshi, communities. Within these areas, 'white enclaves' had produced the strongest BNP vote (Bowyer, 2008). It was also clear that disillusionment with Westminster's political establishment, particularly the Labour Party had played an important role too. Most BNP support had been concentrated in traditional Labour Party heartlands where local Labour parties had been stagnating, or had been in decline (see Wilks-Heeg, 2009). Of the local council seats that had been won by the BNP since 2005, all but six had been previously held by Labour. At local level, as a Labour Party pamphlet (2010, p. 21) had explained,

Tradition is very important to the BNP's narrative – the past is a comforting constant in an insecure present and an uncertain future. The BNP try to take ownership of the past and rose-tint it to emphasise in people's minds the inadequacy of their present circumstances. They use images of the 1950s, of a simpler time and say 'we're the Labour Party your parents voted for'.

What then was the root source of dissatisfaction with Labour? The key driver seems to have been the perception that in its quest for a multicultural society, Labour had prioritised immigrant and ethnic minority groups, especially Muslims, at the expense of native white Britons (Goodwin, 2011, p. 107).

Economic pessimism had also been a factor (BNP voters were the most pessimistic when it came to their views). Moreover, men had been twice as likely to vote BNP as women. The BNP vote had also been drawn from older social groups. One poll carried out during the European elections in 2009 (YouGov) showed that 44 per cent of BNP voters were from the 35-54 age range, and around two-thirds of BNP voters were from social groups C2 (skilled working class), D (unskilled working class) and E (unemployed). What this data confirmed was that the BNP vote had been rooted in a politically abandoned, and economically insecure, white working-class. Its vote had come from an electorate that believed that under multiculturalism, white people have suffered unfair discrimination, and that Muslims in particular benefited from unfair advantage. As James Rhodes noted from his study of BNP voters in Burnley (see Rhodes, 2010), these voters attacked multiculturalism and justified their vote for the BNP by drawing extensively from a discourse of ‘unfairness’ and ‘white victimisation’. But it is important to remember that it is only the presence of a large Muslim community that was associated with higher levels of BNP support. Areas with large black or Indian populations demonstrated no significant effect on BNP voting (Ford and Goodwin, 2010). In other words, the hostility that was expressed towards multiculturalism from typical BNP voters had been tied to the presence of large Muslim minorities – it should not be understood simply as an expression of the crude racism that underpinned electoral support for the National Front in the 1970s. ‘Unlike earlier years’, as Ford and Goodwin (2010, pp. 16-17) clarify, ‘Indian and black Caribbean minorities are a more established and accepted part of society and do not excite as much white hostility’.

THE ELECTORAL DECLINE OF THE BRITISH NATIONAL PARTY

Whilst the ‘demand’ or ‘appetite’ for an anti-immigrant party that promises to restore white ethno-national dominance remained – particularly amongst those whites who feel the most politically, economically, and socially disengaged - the BNP suffered a major setback in the 2010 general and local elections. In Barking where the BNP aspired to win its first parliamentary seat,

Nick Griffin was beaten into third place by sitting Labour MP Margaret Hodge. The BNP's hopes of winning control of Barking and Dagenham council were also dashed. The BNP failed to retain any of the 12 councillors that had been elected in Barking and Dagenham in 2006. Of 28 BNP councillors who stood for re-election in May 2010, all but two were defeated. The BNP's downward slide was further confirmed by the results of the 2011 local elections. The party stood 258 candidates in the 2011 local elections (compared to 742 in 2007) and averaged 8.3 per cent of the vote (compared to 14.7 per cent in 2007). The BNP held on to just two of the eleven seats that it was defending, and lost all representation on Stoke-on-Trent city council. These results left the party with just 13 councillors. By mid-September 2011 the number of BNP councillors had collapsed to single figures and the slump continued into the May 2012 local elections. Not a single one of close to 140 candidates was successful and the party was left with just three councillors. In local elections held in 2013 the BNP averaged a paltry 5.5 per cent of the vote across the 104 seats contested (its sum total of councillors had now fallen to just two).

Much of the BNP's electoral collapse can be explained by internal factors. At the 2010 general election, the BNP's vote in absolute terms saw a marginal increase (its average vote per candidate increased by 48 votes). Moreover, across six regions, it improved on its 2005 regional average. The problem for Griffin was that he had raised expectations to a point where the party rank-and-file had fully expected the BNP to break through into the political mainstream. Griffin had promised to establish the BNP as Britain's fourth political party. Expectations were that it should have made a serious challenge for a parliamentary seat in 2010 at the very least. Furthermore, the nature of its defeat in the 2010 local elections in Barking and Dagenham was acutely embarrassing (Griffin's riled response was to write off multicultural London as a 'lost city').

Internal dissent had been building ever since Griffin's disastrous performance on the BBC's *Question Time* in October 2009. Griffin had expected that his appearance would deliver a major leap in support but his dismal performance had only given rise to derision. Moreover, the

party was also facing a debilitating legal challenge from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (the successor body to the CRE). A fortnight after the 2009 European elections the Commission had written to the BNP demanding that its constitution and membership criteria comply with existing Race Relations legislation. In August 2009 the Commission issued legal proceedings against the BNP and a protracted legal battle ensued that lasted some eighteen months. The upshot was that the BNP forced to do away with its 'whites-only' membership rule, which in turn gave rise to serious internal divisions. During the election campaign itself, there were allegations of financial misappropriation which led to the removal of several key figures from positions of responsibility, including the party's experienced National Elections Officer. The BNP was then subject to further legal action following an Internet general election broadcast that breached copyright, and in the fall-out, the BNP's website was removed from the Internet just two days before the polling day. To make matters worse for the BNP, in its key target areas local Labour parties worked hard to reconnect with ordinary voters on the doorsteps (especially in Barking and Dagenham). The BNP also faced the most sophisticated electoral anti-fascist campaign ever (see Copsey, 2012).

With internal dissent unsurprisingly exacerbated by the frustration of electoral defeat, Griffin indicated that he would be prepared to stand down as party leader at the end of 2013. However, he could not silence his internal critics. At a leadership contest in July 2011, Griffin won but only just - capturing 50.2 per cent compared to Brons' 49.8 per cent. 'The time for division and disruption is over; now is the time to heal', Griffin announced.⁹ Yet the result, as Andrew Brons recognised, was 'the worst mandate the Chairman could win. In effect, the party is split from head to toe...'¹⁰ The BNP haemorrhaged thousands of members (including Brons who became president of an ineffectual BNP splinter group, the British Democratic Party). In December 2011 the BNP claimed a paid-up membership of 7,681; at the end of 2012, in its official return to the Electoral Commission, the BNP's paid-up membership now numbered a meagre 4,097 (a 68 per cent fall on its 2009 membership figure).

ON THE STREETS: THE ENGLISH DEFENCE LEAGUE

With the electoral threat from the extreme-right BNP having apparently receded, the recent and very rapid emergence of a far-right populist street movement – the English Defence League (EDL) – led many commentators to argue that the EDL now represented the greater challenge. The EDL had originally been formed in the summer of 2009 with its early supporters drawn largely from the football hooligan scene. Unlike the BNP, which under the leadership of Nick Griffin abstained from provocative street marches, the EDL emphasised confrontational, street-based activism (see Copsey, 2010; Jackson, 2011; Treadwell and Garland, 2011). As such, it filled the void left by the BNP's abandonment of the streets. By early 2011 the EDL had already held more than 50 demonstrations; many had resulted in public disorder. In July 2013 it was revealed that the total cost of policing EDL demonstrations had exceeded £10 million.

The fear, for some observers, was that EDL incursions into multi-ethnic areas could create flashpoints which might result in 'tit-for-tat' radicalisation (whereby Muslim communities radicalise leading to a further deterioration in community relations). The potential for the development of what Roger Eatwell (2006) has called 'cumulative extremism' was thrown into sharp relief in July 2012 when a group of young Muslims was accused of plotting to violently attack members of the EDL and charged under the 2006 Terrorism Act.

A report by an independent think-tank, published in 2011, had suggested that the EDL's total active support ranged between 25,000 and 35,000 people (although the largest single demonstration that the EDL has staged has probably involved no more than around 3,000 people) (see Demos, 2011). This support base compared favourably to the membership of the BNP although it should be noted that the EDL does not possess a paid-up membership as such: most EDL 'supporters' sign up online through *Facebook*, which is the group's major organisational and communication medium. All the major towns and cities in England have had active EDL divisions with strongest support located in and around London.

The EDL claimed to be a single-issue liberal movement concerned primarily with defending traditional national and cultural identity against the ‘demonic’ threat of Islam. What the EDL represents is a deeply Islamophobic new social movement, but since its ideology is unclear, commentators (and policing authorities) disagreed as to whether the organisation should be classified as ‘extreme right’. The EDL boasted thematic as well as area-based divisions, which included Jewish, lesbian and gay divisions, as well as Hindu and Sikh divisions. It brandished the Israeli flag on its demonstrations; it burnt the swastika flag; it strenuously denied any connection with the BNP. That said, its former leader, ‘Tommy Robinson’ (real name: Stephen Yaxley-Lennon) had once been a member of the BNP. On his time in the BNP (he held membership for a year) Yaxley-Lennon maintained that it had been an ‘error of judgement’. The name ‘Tommy Robinson’ had been chosen by Yaxley-Lennon in homage to a notorious Luton Town football hooligan (in 2011 Yaxley-Lennon was convicted of a football hooligan related offence) and it is important to note the EDL’s heritage in football hooliganism – more so than the established far right. The EDL was not a direct product of the BNP or for that matter the NF. Rather, the EDL’s provenance was in several ultra-patriotic ‘anti-Jihadist’ groups with origins in the football hooligan subculture. This made classifying the EDL ‘far right’ difficult - a problem not helped by the EDL’s nebulous and ill-defined ideology.

The closest the EDL has come to defining an ideology is its Mission Statement.¹¹ This was first released in January 2011. Hitherto the EDL had presented itself as a single-issue campaign group - ‘peacefully protesting against militant Islam’. Reference to ideology was kept to a minimum. This was deliberate. The aim had been to co-opt ‘floating groups’: Sikhs, Jews, gays, women – all those groups that might feel threatened by Islam. In order to do this, it was necessary to keep the focus on shared goals. This explained why its programme was kept very simple and why the EDL presented itself as multi-faith, multi-ethnic, and sometimes even ‘multicultural’. Responding to Cameron’s speech in Munich in 2011, Yaxley-Lennon even

declared that he had no problem with multiculturalism – ‘multiculturalism hasn’t failed’, Yaxley-Lennon maintained - his problem was with Islam.¹²

The EDL’s Mission Statement comprised five points. The first point proclaimed that the EDL is a ‘human rights organisation that exists to protect the inalienable rights of all people to protest against radical Islam’s encroachment into the lives of non-Muslims’. Clearly the EDL’s understanding of human rights does not stretch as far as the human rights of radical Muslims. The EDL insisted that radical Islam has a ‘stranglehold on British Muslims’. It called for an ‘Islamic reformation’ whereby Muslims should have the right to demand reform of their own religion. Yet the EDL do not organise within Muslim communities. The second point of the Mission Statement maintained that Sharia law is incompatible with democratic principles and therefore should be opposed in all its forms (in other words, all Sharia law, presumably even that which covers financial transactions, is anti-democratic). The third point committed the EDL to a campaign of public education in which Islam is understood not just as a religious system but as a totalitarian political and social ideology. Here the EDL blurred the distinction between mainstream and militant Islam. The fourth point called for a defence of English culture against policy-makers who ‘deliberately undermine our culture and impose non-English cultures on the English people in their own land’. If, as the EDL claimed, other ‘foreign’ cultures can integrate and adapt, Islam (and not just its more militant form) is in fundamental conflict with ‘Englishness’. This point is non-negotiable. In other words the ‘English Muslim’ becomes an impossible identity.

Yet for all its spurious rhetoric about inclusion – reaching out to ‘all people’ in England, whatever their background or origin, united in their opposition to the ‘imposition’ of Islam – the EDL remained exclusivist and discriminatory. Non-whites in the EDL constitute a tiny minority. Nonetheless, their very presence allowed the EDL leadership to deny that the EDL is racist and to insist that what defines the ‘people of England’ is not their race but their culture. However, the ‘English’ culture that the EDL is supposedly defending is a predominantly white culture, the

culture of the indigenous (white) English. In the end, it is this visceral urge to restore white ethno-national dominance that positions the EDL on the far right of the political spectrum (even if many EDL sympathisers would not recognise the far-right label, or actively refute it, see Busher, 2013). Moreover, this visceral urge has occasionally found expression in the explicit language of ‘race’. In November 2011, for instance, the EDL released the following statement on their official *Facebook* page:

In the last 66 years we as a nation, as a race have had our national identity stolen from us by politicians who have forced us to accept multiculturalism. They have and still are practicing cultural genocide on their own people, despite warnings that we will not accept it. They have forced us to accept the dilution of our heritage and history by the implementation of laws which will stop us from rising up, even if that’s just to voice an opinion....

And unless we find our backbone and stand up to the ones who are committing crimes against the English people we shall continue to be subjected to slavery by a British elite aided by outside influences whose only intention is to destroy us from within and wipe us out as a **race**. (Emphasis added).¹³

In light of these comments, it is perhaps unsurprising that in early 2012 Nick Griffin commented that, ‘Taken as a whole, and whatever the organisation says, it is now in spirit essentially the ethno-nationalist creation that its name always implied’.¹⁴ In February 2012 Griffin lifted his party’s proscription on the EDL (although in part this move represented a desperate attempt to shore up the BNP’s rapidly dwindling membership).

The final point in the EDL’s Mission Statement committed the EDL to a broader international struggle against ‘Islamic intolerance’ because the demand for ‘sharia is global and

therefore needs to be tackled at a global as well as a national level'. According to the EDL, Western indigenous cultures face being over-run by Islam (and presumably not just the most militant form of Islam but Islam in general). Such views draw from the cultural clash of 'civilisations' thesis whereby the vast expanse and complexity of the modern world is crudely reduced to a simple 'US' (the West) against 'THEM' (Islam/Muslims). Accordingly, though a national organisation, the EDL viewed itself as an integral part of a much broader international 'counter-Jihad' movement.¹⁵

Research published in 2011, carried out on an online sample of 1,295 EDL supporters revealed that around one-third of EDL supporters vote for the BNP. Significantly, EDL supporters also shared many of the same characteristics as BNP voters (although they do tend to be better educated and younger). Like BNP voters, they are male-dominated (around 80 per cent) and whilst anti-Islamic sentiment is obviously important, the type of person who actively supports the EDL also possesses a broader set of concerns about immigration and multiculturalism, about the erosion of traditional English identity, is deeply pessimistic, and feels abandoned by the political elite. A significant number - over 30 per cent – cited 'a love of England' and 'a commitment to the preservation of traditional national and cultural values' as an important reason for their support. An important point to make here is that the EDL is not simply a redoubt for fascists: there are clearly extreme-right elements within its support but there are also many others who shun the traditional far right and vote for the mainstream parties (UKIP, Conservative, for the most part) but nonetheless feel frustrated, disconnected and ignored by central and local government.

When it comes to mobilising on the streets, it has been the EDL's nativist clamour for recognition, voiced through crude, sometimes racist and often violent Islamophobic language which has resonated among disenfranchised sections of the white working-class. The overwhelming majority of EDL demonstrators are young, white, working-class males (although there are some black faces on demonstrations, women, and older people). Often EDL protestors

are unable to define exactly what they are protesting about - all not helped by several hours of drinking (and reportedly in some cases cocaine use) that typically precede these events. The demonstrations are supposedly against 'militant Islam'. However, hostility is very often directed against all Muslims, with aggressive hooligan-style chants such as 'Allah, Allah... who the f-k is Allah?' and 'We all hate Muslims' a recurrent and disturbing feature. Much of this anti-Islamic sentiment masks selective racism against South Asians ('Pakis').

The growth of the EDL, like the BNP before it, has been rooted in a sense of alienation and disaffection felt by the white, working-class. A real concern is loss of national and cultural identity (hence the refrain: 'We want our county back!') and a determination to preserve traditional ethno-national dominance (Englishness). This sits alongside pessimism about the future - the feeling that Britain has entered a state of terminal decline - and the perception that the white working-class is being denied its proper recognition. Resentment is thus directed towards the Muslim minority who, the EDL believe, benefit from preferential treatment, but yet refuse to adopt traditional (i.e. English/British) culture and values. For many, especially for those who reside in multi-racial/multicultural areas where communities are fragmented and divided, Muslims represent the most obvious visible symbol of multicultural transformation.

With doubt, the possibility of violent confrontation with Muslim youth is an obvious driver for some EDL supporters, especially those associated with the football hooligan scene. Others, however, have been keen to prevent disorder. The major driver that pushes EDL supporters to demonstrate (and many of its online supporters have never attended a demonstration), is a sense of injustice and pessimism about the future. Across white working-class neighbourhoods buffeted by socio-economic and demographic change, deep alienation remains. Many 'white-have-nots' feel that they are a forgotten group. As a Joseph Rowntree Foundation report (2011) warned, 'White working-class residents are not being heard'.

The future trajectory of the EDL is impossible to predict with absolute certainty. There has been a decline in the numbers turning out on EDL demonstrations (notwithstanding a short-

term boost in support in 2013 following the horrific murder of British soldier Lee Rigby in Woolwich in what was widely regarded as an Islamist terrorist attack). As a new social movement, the EDL's organisation has been loose and unstable. Splits had emerged between the southern-based EDL leadership and the North East and North West Infidel groups. The latter have been critical of the political direction of the EDL – the Infidels are anti-Semitic – and they accused the EDL's southern-based leadership of stealing funds. There have also been abortive attempts at electoral politics. In November 2011 it was announced that the EDL had formed an electoral association with the British Freedom Party (BFP) - an offshoot from the BNP. Yet the BFP could only muster six candidates in the 2012 local elections and they averaged a derisory 1.9 per cent of the vote (at the end of 2012 the BFP was de-registered as a political party). But potentially the most critical (and surprising) blow to the EDL's prospects came in October 2013 when, acknowledging the dangers of far-right extremism, co-leaders Tommy Robinson (Yaxley-Lennon) and Kevin Carroll announced their resignations from the EDL.

ALL CHANGE ON THE FAR RIGHT?

With both the BNP and EDL seemingly so near to collapse, does this mean that the challenge from the far right has now fully receded? In certain respects, it would seem so. Yet as Goodwin and Evans (2012, p. 29) explain,

When faced with dismal prospects, the tendency is for parties to turn in on themselves, and inhabit increasingly self-referential versions of political and social reality. Such a context may provide fertile ground for the growth of more extremist and combative forms of 'direct action', especially among an inner and more belligerent core of followers.

Goodwin and Evans identified an 'inner hard-core' of right-wing extremists who appear willing to endorse violence and conflict. They found a significant number of core BNP supporters that anticipate inter-group violence in British society and/or endorse pre-emptive action in order to defend the wider ethnic/racial group.

In 2011, according to official government statistics, there were 17 people in Britain serving prison sentences for extreme-right terrorism-related offences, a figure that included one person (Terence Gavan) convicted of 22 offences relating to the manufacture and possession of the largest collection of improvised explosives, firearms and ammunition discovered in Britain in recent years. In 2013 it was reported that around 15 per cent of all the referrals made to a Government counter-terrorism programme concerned people deemed vulnerable to radicalisation from the far right. What is more, groups like the BNP and the EDL can act as 'host' organisations for violent far-right extremists. Terence Gavan was a former member of the BNP; Norwegian terrorist Anders Breivik was allegedly in contact with the EDL, exchanging messages using an internet pseudonym. Whilst the leaderships of organisations like the BNP and EDL would obviously condemn violent terrorism, their message can nonetheless radicalise individuals driven by ethnocentric hostility towards multicultural society, and especially Islam.

This being said, the threat from violent far-right extremism, whilst it clearly exists, should not be exaggerated. In the first place, differences exist between those perpetrators (or would-be perpetrators) of extreme-right wing terror, and perpetrators of Al Qa'ida-related terrorist activity. Aside from the fact that there are substantially more terrorist offenders associated with violent Islamism currently in custody, far-right terrorist activity is typically undertaken by people acting on their own or with one or two associates. Its perpetrators do not normally aspire to conduct operations on the scale of those planned by Al Qa'ida; and none have so far received systematic training, guidance or support. This suggests that the scale of the threat from the extreme right is comparatively less. Moreover, whilst EDL-style demonstrations might continue to pose a threat to public order and social cohesion, and EDL supporters have been involved in both offline and

online anti-Muslim hate crime (there have been numerous cases where EDL supporters have engaged in, or have threatened, more premeditated forms of violence against persons or property),¹⁶ groups like the EDL cannot simply go on demonstrating indefinitely (a point acknowledged by Tommy Robinson in his resignation statement: ‘I recognise that, though street demonstrations have brought us to this point, they are no longer productive’).¹⁷

CONCLUSION

All is not well with British multiculturalism, or so it seems. Over the course of the previous decade there has been a noticeable retreat from multiculturalism in official discourse and public debate. In the aftermath of the riots of 2001 and then the London bombings of 2005, British multiculturalism became the target for a series of scathing attacks from within the political establishment. At local level, scepticism towards multiculturalism expressed itself in white working-class backlash. Replicated across many disadvantaged white working-class communities, white residents felt that they were being treated unfairly, and that Muslims, in particular, had unfair advantage in the competition for scarce resources. This created space for the far right to project itself as vehicle for white working-class resentment. Meanwhile, the BNP had taken measures to ‘normalise’ itself as an ordinary political party and this enabled it to step into the void created by a growing political divide between the Labour Party and its traditional white working-class constituency.

That said, the retreat from multiculturalism by the British political elite should not be overestimated. Much of this retreat has been rhetorical rather than a practical rejection of cultural diversity *per se*. The search for new forms of integration, which in turn led to an official emphasis on ‘community cohesion’, has not occasioned some impulsive rush towards assimilation, but rather to an encouragement of greater inter-cultural dialogue. Moreover, the very absence of a far-right party of the electoral strength of some continental European

counterparts (such as the French National Front) seems to suggest that British multiculturalism has been more a success than a failure.

Electorally, the extreme right in Britain is on the decline and there are clear limitations to the extent to which the English Defence League can break through into the mainstream. Survey work has demonstrated that as long as it remains associated with violence there is a 'firewall' between the EDL and mainstream society (see Lowles and Painter, 2011). But it should not be forgotten that the potential reservoir of support for a far-right populist party remains significant. Surveys suggest that over 20 per cent of the British population is resolutely opposed to immigration; and around 50 per cent believe that Muslims create problems. Indeed one poll suggested that 43 per cent would support a campaign to stop the building a Mosque in their neighbourhood (Lowles and Painter 2011, p. 31).

Britain is not about to go fascist, but whilst the vast majority of Britons do not vote for the BNP, or would never demonstrate in support of the EDL, many British voters share their concerns, that is to say, they are uncomfortable with multiculturalism, suspicious of Islam, and share the view that immigration has undermined British culture, public services, and their job prospects. And this point is currently being borne out by the recent electoral breakthrough of the 'libertarian' anti-EU United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), a sanitised, non-fascist, and ostensibly non-racist populist party, which has positioned itself in the space between the mainstream Conservative right and the far right. Averaging some 20 per cent of the vote in the 2013 local elections, UKIP has tapped into the white working-class constituencies that hitherto supported the BNP. For Nigel Farage, UKIP leader, it is a case of 'rejecting the doctrine of a divided, multicultural society and telling ourselves and the world that we are really proud to be British'.¹⁸

As we have seen, it is within white working-class communities in particular, that resentment towards multiculturalism and immigration runs deepest. So if there has been a 'failure' of multiculturalism, this is where multiculturalism has 'failed' – the British multicultural

project forgot about those parts of the white population that felt abandoned, discriminated against, and victimised. We have made the point that it was this part of the population that was most drawn to the extreme right. Moreover, it is this part of the population that still remains worryingly receptive to the far-right message that growing ethnic diversity is a serious threat to British society (even if the standard-bearer of that message no longer carries the red, white and blue of the BNP but the purple and yellow of UKIP).

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² See <http://www.number10.gov.uk/news/pms-speech-at-munich-security-conference/> (date accessed: 18 April 2012).

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⁷ Traditionally, the far right had understood multiculturalism in terms of a Jewish conspiracy. Griffin now argued that it was a consequence of the 'blind economic force of global capitalism' (BNP 2005, p. 19).

⁸ BNP Statement of Accounts (Silver & Co Chartered Accountants), Year Ended 31 December 2009, p. 6.

⁹ BNP e-newsletter, 25 July 2011.

¹⁰ See <http://bnpideas.com/?p=1053> (date accessed: 26 September 2011).

¹¹ The EDL's Mission Statement at: <http://englishdefenceleague.org/about-us/mission-statement/> (date accessed: 24 April 2012).

¹² See <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJnL-BKc5J0> (date accessed: 20 April 2012).

¹³ For a screenshot, see

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmhaff/1446/1446we04.htm>

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¹⁴ See <http://www.bnp.org.uk/news/national/opportunity-be-seized-why-we-have-lifted-proscription-english-defence-leagueme> (date accessed: 18 April 2012).

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