

MODERNISING AND MAINSTREAMING: THE CONTEMPORARY BRITISH FAR RIGHT

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On a sweltering May Sunday in 2018 Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (aka Tommy Robinson) addressed a crowd of thousands gathered in Westminster, saying:

*We couldn't have done this 3 years ago.
We couldn't have done this 4 years ago.*

We're now mainstream. The public support us.¹

While an exaggeration and a simplification, Lennon was addressing a crowd much bigger than anything the English Defence League ever managed to muster. Whether it was the 'Free Tommy Robinson' event in July, the Day For Freedom event in May or the 'Brexit Betrayal' demonstration in December, the far right descended on the capital in numbers

not seen in decades, perhaps not since the interwar period of the 1930s.² Last year's unprecedented demonstrations came off the back of several huge demonstrations by the Football Lads Alliance street movement at the end of 2017, one of which attracted 50,000 people.³ With such large numbers hitting the streets many have asked whether the far right has now become acceptable and perhaps entered the mainstream in the UK.

The truth is of course more complex and as this article will show, the growing acceptance of the far right is less the result of traditional far-right politics - namely explicit racism, broad anti-immigrant politics and vitriolic homophobia - becoming widely accepted and



Stephen Yaxley-Lennon (aka Tommy Robinson)

more the result of the far right itself adopting a more mainstream platform that allows them to circumvent the traditional *cordon sanitaire* that has marginalised them for decades. By analysing the rhetoric espoused at a series of major far-right events across 2018 and comparing it to societal polling it becomes evident that large parts of the contemporary far-right's platform - namely anti-Muslim politics, co-option of the free speech debate and an anti-elite populism - has widespread public support.

This article will thus show how the far right has undergone a long process of modernisation and moderation that has played an important role in the movement's journey towards the mainstream. However, this is one, albeit important, cause amongst many. The drivers of the rise of the domestic far right are complex and multifaceted and any monocausal explanation would be unhelpfully simplistic. In addition to what is discussed within this article are long term factors such as the decline of the societal anti-fascist consensus, the negative effects of deindustrialisation and globalisation coupled with cultural concerns and disaffection with multiculturalism. Especially important has been the emergence of the internet and more recently social media which has revolutionised the way in which the far right, both domestic and international, operates. The modern far right can reach international audiences online that would have been almost inconceivable to the traditional postwar far right and as such, while this article explores the changing message of the British far right it is worth remembering that this has coincided with a change in the medium by which it is delivered.

For the purpose of this article the far right is being defined as an umbrella term that encompasses those individuals and organisations whose political outlook is more extreme or hardline than those of the centre-right of the political spectrum, primarily on issues such as race, culture, immigration, or identity. In practice, this usually means a belief in exceptionalist nationalism of either a race or country rather than mere patriotism. Coupled with this is a belief that the nation (either geographic or racial) is in decay or crisis and radical action is required to halt or reverse it. The 'nation', however defined, usually includes an in-group that is under threat and an out-group/enemy, usually now identified

as Islam and Muslims though this can be any minority community. As an umbrella term, it encompasses people and movements ranging from the democratic, populist, radical right through to the extreme authoritarian far right. By virtue of 'far right' being a broad umbrella term it is worth stating from the outset that the majority of this article is about the people and organisations that are currently gathered around Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, which more precisely might be described as the Islamophobic, populist radical right. Thus, when talking about the current actions of, or narratives used by the modern British far right, it is this broad, often decentralised and sometimes ideologically diverse conglomeration that has gathered around Lennon in recent years that is being referred to. These people are best understood as an angry collective, united by a deep distrust of politicians and the political system more generally, who believe that there is a devious and sinister 'elite' - sometimes domestic, sometimes international - who oppress and control them, often with the 'tool' of political correctness. They feel angry, ignored and oppressed.

For the avoidance of doubt, while there are large numbers of far-right activists in the aforementioned Football Lads Alliance and its splinter group, the Democratic Football Lads Alliance, the organisations themselves are not uniformly far right and are not being labelled so in this article. Finally, there are of course more extreme elements to the British far right, such as racial nationalists and neo-nazis but they are not the focus of the article.

THE MODERNISING JOURNEY OF THE CONTEMPORARY FAR-RIGHT

Throughout the whole postwar period the British far right has sought out an Other, a target of their ire, off the back of which they hope to secure wider public support and gain entry into the mainstream of domestic politics. In the years immediately following the Second World War the British far right was still obsessed with its traditional enemy, namely Jews, a target that, in the post-Holocaust age, only served to isolate them further from the mainstream. However, as public hostility toward the arrival of non-white immigrant communities grew, large sections of the UK far right shifted their attacks towards the new arrivals.⁴

By the 1970s, the far right was ready to seize any available political capital by targeting whichever community they felt would garner the widest public support. One only has to take the briefest look at how the far right reacted to the arrival of Ugandan Asians in 1972, to understand how between the late 1940s and the early 1970s immigration shot up the agenda with their realisation that it was *the* issue that could help them break out of their post-Holocaust exile. The National Front (NF), then Britain's leading far-right party, greeted Edward Heath's compassionate decision to grant asylum to many Ugandan Asians in 1972 with a ruthless but astute political campaign. The result of the NF's swift opportunism led to a rapid swelling of their rank-and-file membership.⁵ However, the NF reacted as it did in 1972 because of the lessons that the far right had learnt in the late 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. While antisemitism always remained at the core of the British far right, anti-immigration politics was widely viewed as their ticket into the mainstream and became a core tenet of their campaigns.

The next shift came in the 1980s when the primary target of the far right slowly began to move from all immigrants, with an emphasis on anti-black racism, towards a more specific anti-Muslim politics. Matthew Collins, former NF organiser turned anti-fascist, pinpointed the Salman Rushdie Affair as the moment this shift occurred: "Salman Rushdie's book was when the far right first saw Islam and all its challenges. And that's never changed since then. It's always been about Muslims since then."⁶ While much of the British far right began to specifically target Muslims throughout the 1990s, the shift to making Islam and Muslims their primary target was solidified a little later. Historian Graham Macklin argues that the British National Party (BNP) began to base its campaigns around Islam, "Following serious rioting in the deprived Northern towns of Burnley, Bradford and Oldham in the summer of 2001, coupled with the attacks on the World Trade Centre of 9/11."⁷ Nick Griffin, then leader of the BNP said of Islam and Muslims in 2006:

*This is the factor which is going to dominate politics for decades to come. This is the enemy that the public can see and understand. This is the threat that can bring us to power. This is the Big Issue on which we must concentrate in order to wake people up and make them look at what we have to offer all around.*⁸

For much of the far right, not just in the UK but all over Europe, the effect of 9/11 and the simultaneous or subsequent adoption of anti-Muslim politics has acted as their springboard towards the mainstream.

However, the shift towards anti-Muslim politics was just one element of a wider modernisation project that has contributed to the normalisation of the far right which placed the movement on the road to where we find it today. Historian Dave Renton has argued that this process should be traced back to the NF arguing that they were "an early example of a kind of politics which has since become all too familiar"⁹ and that John Tyndall, then leader of the NF, "understood that the Front needed to modernise if it was to appeal to supporters of the Monday Club and other Conservatives".¹⁰ However, as Macklin notes, the major modernisation of the British far right came under Nick Griffin's BNP who sought to insulate them from:

the 'careless extremism' emanating from within his own party, stressing that there was no longer any room for the 'Three H's': 'hard talk', 'hobbyism' and 'Hitler' [...] In its place four un-objectionable 'apple pie' concepts were enunciated: 'freedom', 'security', 'ideology' and 'democracy', which the party now promoted as the embodiment of its ideals".¹¹

The idea was "to portray liberalism as the real 'totalitarianism' and its proponents as 'tyrants' in contrast to the BNP 'who stand for freedom'".¹² As Griffin himself said in 1999 the plan was to use "the weight of democracy's own myths and expectations against it by side-stepping and using verbal judo techniques."¹³

English Defence League: Anti-Muslim prejudice as a door to the mainstream?

As the foregoing makes salient, the threats posed by the contemporary far right have not emerged overnight but rather are the result of a long process of change and modernisation. However, while the NF and the BNP indicated the direction of travel, it was the English Defence League (EDL) that properly laid the groundwork for the more successful and mainstream movement we face today. As the sociologist Joel Busher argues in *The Making of Anti-Muslim Protest: Grassroots activism in the English Defence League*, "The emergence of the EDL marked a new chapter in the history of anti-minority activism in Britain".¹⁴



Stephen Yaxley-Lennon announces his resignation from the EDL alongside Quilliam's Maajid Nawaz in October 2013

The group was founded in 2009 and emerged out of a series of protests that took place in Luton in reaction to an Islamist protest that heckled a homecoming parade for British soldiers returning from Iraq. The formal launch of the EDL came via Facebook on 27 June 2009 and its first demonstration took place in Whitechapel, East London, on the same day.

In essence, the EDL created a blueprint for modern far-right politics in Britain, many of the core tenets of which have, in recent years, proved successful. Unlike the BNP, who underneath a superficial veneer of acceptability remained a far-right party with a lineage that could be directly traced back to the explicit fascist and neo-nazi movement of the postwar period, the EDL marked a more genuine schism with the past. While Griffin encouraged his core supporters to *hide* their biologically racist politics, the leadership of the EDL made much more earnest attempts to distance their movement ideologically from the traditional far right; consciously eschewing any hint of biological racism in favour of a much narrower platform concerned only with Islam.¹⁵ As George Kassimeris and Leonie Jackson argue, “The movement rejects the BNP’s conflation of Muslims, immigrants and non-whites, and does not concern itself with multiculturalism in general.”¹⁶ Their analysis of the EDL News website found that “Only two of 117 EDL News articles discussed immigration,

and neither politicised the issue.”¹⁷ As Hilary Pilkington rightly states in *Loud and Proud: Passion and Politics in the English Defence League*, “This single issue focus - and absence, for example, of a more general anti-immigration stance - has been a persistent source of criticism from more traditional far-right groups.”¹⁸ However, while it might have ostracised them from the traditional far right, it did make their platform more palatable, tapping into the broader societal prejudice against Muslims.

In addition to adopting a narrower, non-biologically racist platform, they also sought to consciously distance themselves from the often-vitriolic homophobia of the traditional far right. While the BNP had stickers that said “Outlaw Homosexuality”, the EDL had a LGBT Division and the series of large far-right demonstrations focused around former EDL leader Stephen Yaxley-Lennon in 2018 embraced some openly gay individuals as figureheads. The issue of attitudes to LGBTQ+ rights in the modern far right is a complex one but it suffices to note that many now engage in a limited discourse with gay men, largely for strategic purposes. Positioning the *right* to be gay as a core Western value has enabled the EDL and the contemporary far right more generally to attack Islamic and non-Western cultures for their perceived intolerance, bolstering the argument that such cultures

are incompatible with the West. Sometimes cynically, sometimes completely genuinely, the modern far right use gay rights as a “wedge issue” between LGBTQ+ individuals, liberal left-wingers and Muslims. However, whether tokenistic or real this development has served to make the modern far right appear more palatable during a period of improving societal attitudes towards the gay community.¹⁹

In its early years the EDL portrayed their movement as consciously anti-racist, anti-homophobia and pro-human rights. In place of the broader biologically racist and homophobic platform of the traditional far right, the EDL “utilised rhetorical strategies such as denial of prejudice, projection of culturally racist motivations on to Muslims, positive-self and negative-other representation, and diminutives such as ‘we are not against all Muslims, but ...’.”²⁰ In early 2011 the EDL released a manifesto that followed on from the adoption of liberal rhetoric pioneered by Griffin and the BNP. Point 1 of their manifesto was the “Protecting and Promoting Human Rights” and described the EDL as “a human rights organisation”. Point 2 claimed they worked to promote “Democracy And The Rule Of Law” while the other points were ‘Public Education’, ‘Respecting Tradition’ and ‘Working In Solidarity With Others Around The World’.²¹ In essence, “the EDL rearticulated Islamophobia as anti-racism and attempted to normalise it as the natural perspective of those committed to liberal freedom.”²² The co-option of liberal, or even traditionally progressive concepts, such as “human rights”, coupled with their rejection of explicit biological racism, meant the EDL, on paper at least, had the potential to resonate with a far broader audience than the traditional far right before them had been able to.

None of this is to say that the EDL did not attract far-right extremists - it certainly did - but it does mean, as the historian Nigel Copsey argued at the time: “we should not view it simply through the prism of the established far right. Unlike the BNP (or the NF), the EDL is not driven by a fascist or neo-fascist ideological end-goal.”²³ However, one must be careful not to merely take the pronouncements of the EDL and its leadership at face value, as there is always the danger of concentrating on just the public declarations of the far right and detaching these from the reality as experienced by its adherents and victims, overlooking what might in fact indicate a different end goal to that espoused,

and bestowing on them an unwarranted legitimacy. While constantly claiming not to be racist or prejudiced, even having an LGBT Division and a Jewish Division, the reality on the ground at EDL demonstrations was regularly far detached from the lofty human rights rhetoric of their manifesto.²⁴ The eyewitness based accounts produced by HOPE not hate at the time have subsequently been backed up by scholarly work that argues that:

despite the group’s claims to the contrary, EDL Islamophobia is an example of (culturally) racist discourse construction. Through the demarcation of a non-Muslim in-group, presented as superior in culture and values, and a Muslim out-group, which is represented as threatening the privilege and position of the former, EDL discourse functions ideologically to maintain traditional ethno-cultural privilege and exclude Muslims from the national community.²⁵

Similarly, Copsey described it as, “a deeply Islamophobic new social movement.”²⁶

From roughly 2009-2012, the EDL was the most important and well-known anti-Muslim group in Europe. Its regular demonstrations attracted thousands and made news around the world and Lennon became a leading figure with important contacts across Europe and North America. The EDL peaked at their homecoming demonstration in Luton on 5 February 2011 at a demonstration that attracted 3000 people making it, at the time, the largest anti-Muslim demonstration in the UK. However, by the end of 2011 the EDL began to decline which Joel Busher convincingly argues was because they ‘found them[selves] at a tactical impasse’.²⁷ The repetitiveness of endless demonstrations, and the dwindling emotional returns coupled with the leadership’s crackdown on violence, hooliganism and alcohol as well as the police decision to increasingly deny access to town centres and move demonstrations to isolated periphery sites reduced the atmosphere and excitement of events.

What followed was a downward spiral as ever-smaller demonstrations increased internal tensions and infighting, seeing many EDL activists break away to form their own groups or quit the movement entirely. The murder of off-duty soldier Lee Rigby in Woolwich in May 2013 provided a brief pause in their downward trajectory but despite their best efforts

to capitalise on the tragedy they achieved little more than the swelling of social media numbers and a few larger demonstrations. The final hammer blow came in October 2013 when Lennon and his cousin and deputy Kevin Carroll stood down as leaders.²⁸ While the EDL continues to exist and hold small and infrequent demonstrations, the organisation is now a shadow of its former self and is now something of an irrelevance on the UK far-right scene.

POST-EDL

However, while there was a clear difference between the EDL as experienced on the ground and their public declarations, the latter remains important for understanding the current success of the far right. While they abjectly failed to live up to their declarations, the idea of having a platform that frames anti-Muslim politics through a skewed human rights and liberal framework has since been refined into a very successful rhetorical tactic. These tactics, honed by the EDL, are now the core tenet of the contemporary far right, with UKIP leader Gerard Batten, who has shifted the party increasingly further right in recent years, even quoting the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights during his speech at the 2018 ‘Day for Freedom’ rally in London.²⁹

Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, though no longer leader of the EDL, is *de facto* figurehead of the contemporary British far-right, and again has taken to mobilising his followers on the streets to protest at a level that would have been unthinkable at the height of the EDL. The largest EDL demonstration attracted around 3000 people to Luton in February 2011. That year Jamie Bartlett and Mark Littler of the think-tank Demos produced the report ‘Inside the EDL’ in which they estimated that the highest hypothetical number of demonstrators that the EDL could ever muster at a London event would be 12,000 but cautioned that it was:

very unlikely they would ever achieve that. To attain this number would require every London based individual who has ever demonstrated at an EDL demonstration in London doing so, plus everyone outside London who has travelled over 100 kilometres to demonstrate on behalf of the EDL coming to London.³⁰

In 2017, the Football Lads Alliance, which is not a uniformly far-right street movement but nonetheless has a widespread anti-Islam inflection,³¹ attracted 10,000 people to their first demonstration and a staggering 50,000 to their second in October 2017, including Lennon.³² In 2018, in London, there were a series of demonstrations that were at least double the size of any EDL demonstration and the ‘Free Tommy’ demonstration in June attracted around 15,000 people.³³ While ostensibly about Lennon’s imprisonment, the narrative advanced by his own supporters was very much that he had been incarcerated for “telling the truth” about Islam and Muslims.³⁴

POPULISM AND FREE SPEECH: ‘TOMMY’ IS THE NEW MANDELA?

Alongside opposition to Islam, the most discussed topic at major far right demonstrations in 2018 and early 2019 was free speech, or more specifically, the supposed suppression of free speech at the hands of ‘political correctness’. Emblematic of the contemporary far right’s attempt to co-opt the free speech issue was the series of small and medium-sized far-right demonstrations in early 2018 at Speakers’ Corner in London’s Hyde Park; an area designated for open-air public speaking and debate and thus synonymous with free speech in Britain. The biggest of these came in March when a crowd of roughly 1000 gathered to hear Lennon deliver a speech written by Martin Sellner, the *de facto* spokesperson for the European far-right network, Generation Identity (GI).³⁵ GI is a pan-European, far right youth movement, originating in France in 2012 with the launch of *Génération Identitaire*. The movement uses a thinly-veiled racist terminology, is strongly anti-Muslim and seeks to prevent what it calls the ‘Islamification’ of Europe by migrants and refugees as part of a ‘Great Replacement’ of ‘indigenous’ Europeans. It is motivated by the political ideology of ‘identitarianism’, a set of ideas derived from the work of a collection of postwar European far-right thinkers known as the *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right).³⁶

The Hyde Park demonstration was called after a United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) youth event titled ‘Free Speech, Generation Identity, and the Great Replacement’, featuring Sellner, was cancelled.³⁷ Sellner vowed to come to the UK regardless and deliver

his speech³⁸ but was refused entry by the Home Office (along with North American far-right activists Brittany Pettibone and Lauren Southern),³⁹ at which point Lennon stepped in to deliver it on his behalf.⁴⁰ The speech, subsequently published on both the Generation Identity UK and Breitbart websites, declared:

Dear Friends, dear Britons, dear lovers of free speech. I assume you all are lovers of free speech because you have come to Speakers' Corner. [...] [T]he tradition of freedom of speech in the United Kingdom — is dead. [...] The battle, our battle for freedom of speech, has just begun, and Speakers' Corner will become a symbolic place in that struggle.⁴¹

A series of subsequent far-right gatherings at Hyde Park followed over the following weeks attracting speakers and supporters such as Anne Marie Waters of the anti-Muslim the For Britain Movement and the UK branch of Generation Identity.⁴² The far right's preoccupation with, and attempted co-option of, the free speech issue culminated in May when Lennon organised the 'Day For Freedom' demonstration in Westminster, attracting thousands to central London. While previous incarnations of the British far right had paid lip service to the idea of free speech, this event, on paper at least, was consciously constructed as a genuine forum for it. Speaking on the day, Lennon claimed that:

We live in a post-free speech era. There is no pretending it. We don't have free speech. Everyone talks about free speech. We have no right to free speech in the UK. Does anyone really feel free saying their opinions? Do they feel free with your bosses at work? Most people have to hide the fact they even come to these demonstrations. That's not freedom.⁴³

Similarly, UKIP member and social media figure Mark Meechan (AKA 'Count Dankula') told the crowds, during a speech laced with anti-government populism, that the "reasons that these speakers are here today isn't because the right have claimed the principle of free speech. It's because the left have abandoned it."⁴⁴ Meechan, is a YouTube "comedian", notorious for teaching a dog to nazi salute in response to the commands "Sieg heil" and "gas the Jews", for which he was convicted of hate speech.⁴⁵ Meechan's legal woes have made him something of a martyr to the likes

of Lennon and his supporters, hence his invitation to the Day For Freedom event in May.

While one has to be careful not to simply take the word of far-right activists at face value and accept their genuine commitment to the right of free speech, one also should not write it off automatically as disingenuous. The Day For Freedom event was notably different to most previous far-right events in the UK and even included a performance from the drag act 'Vanity von Glow' – surely a first at a far-right event – who Lennon introduced to the stage after saying of his supporters:

We are stereotyped, we're stereotyped as thugs, as racists, as far right, as intolerant. [...] [This performer is] quite well known within the drag queen circles in London. A very left-wing movement. It takes guts for them to come here as everyone would predict, all the media portray you people as intolerant. I want you to give them a massive warm welcome onto the stage.⁴⁶

While HOPE not hate observers witnessed numerous crowd members leaving in disgust during the performance, the vast majority stayed.

However, even if one is to take a charitable reading of the earnestness of the organisations, the limits of the commitment of some of their protestors to free speech were exposed when prominent Muslim YouTuber, Ali Dawah, originally billed to speak as proof of the events commitment to free speech, was pulled from the bill and attacked by protestors.⁴⁷ An epitomising example of selective application of rights comes from Day For Freedom speaker Milo Yiannopoulos, who said at a 2017 talk at the University of New Mexico:

I try to think of myself as a free speech fundamentalist, I suppose the only real objection, and I haven't really reconciled this myself, is when it comes to Islam. [...] I struggle with how freely people should be allowed to preach that particular faith [Islam] in this country.⁴⁸

In many ways, Yiannopoulos is a good example of this modern post-EDL far right, making much of the fact that he is a gay man with a black partner. He made his name as a key promoter of the "Gamergate" movement, a 2014 campaign against the perceived encroachment of feminism into gaming culture,

marred by the brutal harassment of female game developers and critics.⁴⁹ Yiannopoulos, who has called feminism “cancer”,⁵⁰ was permanently banned from Twitter in 2016 for his role in encouraging the harassment of black actor Leslie Jones.⁵¹ Whilst working for the far-right alternative media outlet Breitbart News Network Yiannopoulos emerged as a figurehead of the Alternative Right,⁵² downplaying the brazen racism of some elements associated with the loose movement. His reputation was ruined in February 2017 after footage emerged of him appearing to endorse sexual relationships between “younger boys and older men”, following which he was forced to apologise and to step down from Breitbart, also losing his \$255,000 book deal with publisher Simon & Schuster.⁵³

Clearly, amongst the organisers, speakers and attendees at the Day For Freedom event the levels of commitment to genuine free speech varied significantly, ranging from completely tactical to completely genuine. However, it is worth noting that some activists might passionately believe in ‘free speech’ without necessarily having the same understanding of it as others. In addition, when seeking to understand why the current far right is attracting such large numbers onto the streets, it matters more what people’s *perceptions* of the organisers beliefs are, rather than what their actual beliefs are.

THE ‘OPPRESSED PEOPLE’

When analysing the prevailing discourse around free speech (however real or conceited), it is important to note that it is not merely that people believe this right has been curtailed, but that it has been curtailed at the hands of an authoritarian or totalitarian oppressor; often categorised as ‘fascist’. Unlike the BNP and the traditional far right who merely publicly eschewed fascism and Nazism, the movement around Lennon genuinely conceptualises themselves as the victims of totalitarianism and fascism. Rather than the modern movement’s success simply being the result of a broader, weakened societal anti-fascist consensus – though it certainly has weakened – this movement generally speaking has accepted this consensus and emerged within it, and thus conceptualises their struggle within the dichotomy between (fascist) ‘oppressor’ and (non-fascist) ‘oppressed’, with them being the latter.

As Richard Inman of the Veterans Against Terrorism group said at the Day For Freedom demonstration: “We are the silent majority and the people who try to close us down earlier on, the people that try to silence us, they are fascists because they hate freedom of speech and we are patriots because we love freedom of speech.”⁵⁴ Similarly, speaking in Belgium in 2019, Lennon talked of “this fascism that



“Free Tommy” protest in London, 2018

happens to us”⁵⁵ while Anne Marie Waters implored a cheering London crowd to “Fight these tyrants with everything you’ve got.”⁵⁶ One of the major hurdles the traditional postwar far right faced was overcoming the reflexively negative societal reaction to fascism and the far right. However, since the EDL and especially with the movement currently gathered around Lennon, they don’t seek to overcome this but rather have accepted it, modified it and sought to adopt it; rather than seeking to rehabilitate fascism they believe and portray themselves to be the victims of it.

For this framing to work, it requires the activists to genuinely see themselves as not extreme or fringe but rather as ordinary, normal exemplars of ‘the people’. As Canadian far-right activist Gavin McInnes said at the Day For Freedom, “We are at a point now where being a normal human being is considered radical. To talk in public the way you talk to your brother is considered radical. I don’t know how we got here, I guess it’s in the name of tolerance but it’s not who we are.”⁵⁷ Similarly, Yiannopoulos, at the same event, claimed the height of their ambition is simply to “demand that ordinary, respectable, reasonable points of view are allowable in polite society and appear just a bit more often on tele[vision].”⁵⁸ As was heard at demonstration after demonstration in 2018, from the stage and in the crowds, normal people, with supposedly completely ‘normal’ and acceptable views are being ‘oppressed’ by a powerful, liberal, perhaps even (paradoxically) fascist elite, out to suppress and oppress them.

For this reason, much of the British far right, especially those loosely gathered around Lennon, fit comfortably within Cas Mudde’s definition of populism:

[A]n ideology that considers society to be separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” versus “the corrupt elite”, and which argues that politics should be an expression of the *volonté générale* (general will) of the people.⁵⁹

The protestors who hit the streets in 2017 and 2018 are best understood not as an organised fascist movement but rather as an angry collective, united by a deep distrust of politicians and the political system more generally, who believe that there is a devious and sinister ‘elite’ – sometimes domestic, sometimes international – who oppress and

control them, often with the ‘tool’ of political correctness. They feel angry, ignored and oppressed. As such, they understand each issue being demonstrated against – be it the arrest of Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, the ‘cover-up’ of what they call ‘Muslim grooming gangs’ or the ‘betrayal’ of Brexit – as symptoms of a ‘broken’ or ‘rigged’ system, rather than as independent and separate injustices.

For this reason, those such as Lennon who oppose this supposed oppression are categorised by their supporters, not as modern versions of fascist or racist “heroes” from yesteryear, but rather as new incarnations of traditionally progressive civil rights heroes or freedom fighters. As Batten argued in July 2018, “Tommy Robinson is someone who has chosen to defend the weak and the helpless” and thus “History will judge Tommy Robinson as being on the right side of a great cause in a struggle between good and evil”. He even un-ironically compared Lennon to the suffragettes, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela and Robin Hood.⁶⁰ Similarly, at the same event Filip DeWinter of the Belgium anti-Muslim party Vlaams Belang, said, “Tommy Robinson for me, and for all of you, and lots of common people here in Britain and Europe and all over the world is a modern Braveheart. Not a right-wing hooligan but a civil rights hero.”⁶¹ It is easy to scoff at the ridiculousness of any comparison between Lennon and Mandela but it is necessary to understand that there is an internal logic at play here. If one generally believes that they are a victim, being oppressed at the hands of a powerful elite, then the person who fights for your rights and is supposedly imprisoned as a result, can be viewed within a civil rights or freedom fighting tradition. The fact that this isn’t true doesn’t mean that many attendees at demonstrations in 2018 didn’t passionately believe it to be so. The point is to understand that what seems a ludicrous inversion to many is not a duplicitous tactic but a genuinely held belief by many and, if we are to understand what motivates so many people to attend far-right organised events, we have to understand this dynamic.

CHIMING WITH ‘THE PEOPLE’

As has been shown, the British far right has been on a decades long modernisation process that has resulted in a contemporary movement that has consciously, and in more recent years more genuinely, eschewed

Nazism, fascism and explicitly racial politics, and replaced it with a narrower anti-Muslim, pro-free speech platform, coupled with the populist notion that they, ‘the people’, are being oppressed by a tyrannical elite. There is a tendency to understand the ‘mainstreaming’ of the far right as simply meaning the increasing acceptability of previously unacceptable ideas. However, in reality, large parts of the far-right’s traditional platform, namely explicit racism, anti-immigrant politics and hardcore antisemitism, remain beyond the pale for many; the *cordon sanitaire*, while crumbling, remains generally in place. What has actually happened is the far right has adapted its message and adopted a platform that is more palatable to the public, within the confines of acceptability. This process has been uneven with the NF and BNP doing this purely superficially, the EDL believing it rhetorically but not manifesting it in reality and now the contemporary far right appearing to genuinely believe it, though still failing to fully grasp what these beliefs entail. With each stage of increasing earnestness, there has been an increase in mainstream acceptability and normalisation. Unlike previous generations of the British far right whose platforms acted as a barrier to societal acceptance, the platform adopted by contemporary far right acts as a conduit into the mainstream.

To understand whether the core elements of the far-right’s contemporary platform resonate with the general public, HOPE not hate have engaged in extensive polling, and specifically commissioned a poll for this article. While important to avoid simplistic or monocausal explanations for any phenomenon, these results likely go some way to explaining why 2018 saw the largest far-right demonstrations in the UK since the 1930s.

ISLAM AND MUSLIMS

Over the last seven years, HOPE not hate have seen a considerable shift in attitudes, as (on the whole) the country feels more confident about immigration. As Rosie Carter explained in HOPE not hate’s 2018 *Fear, Hope and Loss* report:

The reasons for this more positive view of immigration are complicated, but much can be attributed to a broader liberal shift in public attitudes, increased diversity, an improvement in economic conditions, and for those with more

hostile attitudes, a sense that Brexit might solve the ‘immigration problem’ has reduced concern.⁶²

However, concerns about Muslims and Islam in Britain have hardened. Attitudes towards immigration have become steadily more positive over time, and on the whole people see more gains than pressures. Immigration has steadily fallen down the public’s set of “most important issues”, and a poll commissioned by HOPE not hate in July 2018 found 60% of people think that immigration has been good for Britain, up from 40% when people were asked the same question in 2011 and 50% when people were asked in January 2016.⁶³ In polling commissioned for this article just 15% of people placed immigration and asylum amongst the top three most important issues facing them and their family.⁶⁴ Again, Carter’s analysis applies here: Whilst the reasons for this more positive view of immigration are complicated, much can be attributed to a broader liberal shift in public attitudes, increased diversity, an improvement in economic conditions, and for those with more hostile attitudes, a sense that Brexit might solve the ‘immigration problem’ has reduced concern. Clearly, a far right that was preoccupied solely with immigration would increasingly fail to resonate with the general public.

However, Muslims are seen as uniquely different from the majority of the British public, and distinctly different from other religious groups. In our July 2017 poll, just 10% of the total public believed Muslims were similar to them, and even among the most liberal group in the survey, just under a quarter felt Muslims were similar to them.⁶⁵ From 2011-2016, our *Fear and HOPE* polls found attitudes to Muslims and Islam in Britain were softening, although Muslims were still seen as distinctly different from other groups in society. However, the spate of terror attacks which hit the UK in 2017 have had an enduring impact on attitudes towards Muslims in Britain. In our March 2018 poll, 18% of people in our survey were more suspicious of British Muslims and the way they felt British Muslims had responded to the attacks. In addition to the 2017 terror attacks, the child sexual exploitation (“grooming”) scandals across the UK, including in Rochdale, Rotherham, Oxford, and Telford, have all added to tensions as well. In Rotherham alone, the National Crime Agency estimated 1,510 children were exploited

over a 16-year period. This has contributed to narratives about Islam as a threat, or Muslims ‘taking over’ UK cities, moving from the margin to the mainstream. In our July 2018 YouGov research of 10,383 people, a staggering 32% of people believed that there were ‘no-go areas’ in Britain where Sharia law dominates and non-Muslims cannot enter, with almost half of all Leave voters (49%) and Conservative voters (47%) stating that this was true.⁶⁶ A poll of 2,244 people in April 2019 reaffirmed these results with 33% believing there are no-go areas, rising to 50% amongst Leave voters.⁶⁷ Moreover, a July poll found that nearly a third – 28% – of respondents felt that Islamist terrorists reflected a widespread hostility to Britain from among the Muslim community, with 32% of men perceiving this broader hostility, 37% of Conservative voters, and a huge 62% of Leave voters.⁶⁸

Polling commissioned specifically for this article reaffirmed our previous research, finding that Muslims are seen as distinctively different from any other religious group and are seen more negatively. Most people do not have strongly held views that are particularly positive or negative about any religious group but, where they do, people are more likely to have positive than negative views of each major religious group (Christians, Jews, Sikhs, Hindus and atheists), with the exception being Muslims. Moreover, fewer people see Muslims positively than any other religious group. Worryingly, 10% of people have very strong negative views about Muslims – more than twice the proportion that see any other religious group in the same way. The same number of people (29%) polled believe that Islam is a threat to the British way of life and think that it is ‘incompatible’.⁶⁹

With such widespread concerns about Islam and Muslims in the UK one can see how the British far right’s increasing move towards anti-Muslim politics has opened a possible door to the mainstream. As historian Paul Jackson points out:

Muslims have become the most predominant scapegoats for the far right today, as anti-Semitic and anti-Afro Caribbean prejudices have become more unacceptable. Contrastingly, nativist forms of ‘cultural racism’ can appear more tolerant, and therefore command greater public legitimacy.⁷⁰

This increasingly negative attitude towards Muslims since 2017 has coincided with the growth of the domestic anti-Muslim far right and with the largest far-right demonstrations in the UK for decades.

FREE SPEECH AND POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

When it comes to the idea that free speech is being suppressed by political correctness, a central tenet of contemporary far-right rhetoric, a YouGov poll, commissioned by HOPE not hate for this article, shows clearly how widely this narrative resonates with the public. 51% of those polled agreed with the statement “Political correctness is used by the liberal elite to limit what we can say”. This rises to 70% amongst Leave voters, 67% amongst 2017 Conservative voters and 80% of UKIP voters in 2015. Conversely, just 49% agree that “Concern about political correctness has been whipped up by the right wing media to undermine those who believe in tolerance and anti-racism”, sinking to just 33% of Leave voters and 33% amongst 2017 Conservative voters and 20% of 2015 UKIP voters.⁷¹

Clearly, the idea that free speech is being suppressed at the hands of political correctness is by no means a view confined to the far right, with many across the political spectrum voicing concerns. As such the far right’s co-option of the free speech debate has the added advantage of not being a binary right/left issue with many on the more libertarian left sharing concerns about suppression of free speech, tapping in also to a wider societal concern over the issue at present. The mainstream press regularly carry articles and op-eds bemoaning the supposed suppression of free speech, often at the hands of left-wing ‘snowflakes’ or “bullying students” on campuses.⁷² The co-option of this issue, be it genuine or tactical, means the far right have a second issue to campaign around which has widespread support and thus once again offers a route into the mainstream.

POPULISM AND ANTI-POLITICS

More so than in previous decades, the British far right has increasingly adopted the populist concept that they represent ‘the people’ against ‘the elites’ that are out to oppress them. HOPE not hate’s polling shows clearly that a general societal perception has emerged in recent years that the political system is

broken, that there is a democratic deficit, and that elites and the establishment do not speak for ordinary people, a perception that could be one of the contributing factors in the mainstreaming of the far right. The cause of this is, as always, a combination of long and short term factors and it's true that levels of trust in politicians had long remained "stubbornly low".⁷³ It seems likely that the 2009 Expenses Scandal was an important event in fostering discontent and mistrust in the political system. As Professor Matthew Flinders notes, "The real victim, as surveys revealed at the time, was public confidence and faith in politics: Parliament really was on its knees."⁷⁴ In the short term, there is little doubt that the inability of politicians to manage Brexit competently and decisively is the overwhelming factor in undermining faith in the ability of the political system to work. Brexit has split the main parties and fractured the traditional political order resulting in the acceleration of a realignment of British politics that has been happening for a long time.

When people feel that the system is broken, they look outside of this and in so doing step into a political arena where the far right is able to capitalise on these fears, offering simplistic answers to complex problems. A HOPE not hate poll from February 2019 showed a massive 55% of people think that our political system is broken. A huge three quarters of people (75%) think that politicians put the interests of big business before people like them. Social group C2DE (58%), Labour voters (65%) and UKIP voters (70%) are most likely to think the political system is broken.⁷⁵ A feeling of distance from the political system has grown as the Brexit negotiations have gone on, with many feeling they are not represented by the political system. In just six months, HOPE not hate's polling showed that the proportion of people who feel that any of the main political parties reflect what they think has fallen, with just 32% of people saying that they feel represented by any of the main political parties. A HOPE not hate poll carried out in April 2019 found a staggering 72% of people now feel that none of the main political parties speak for them, an increase from the already worrying 68% in February 2019. When asked whether most members of the Houses of Parliament do or do not have the best interests of British people at heart, 60% believed "Most of them do not" rising to 83% amongst 2015 UKIP voters. The same April poll found a general mistrust

towards the mainstream media, which the far right claim is part of the 'elite', finding that 59% answered 'not at all' or 'not much' when asked if they trust traditional or established broadcasting or publishing outlets.⁷⁶

CONCLUSION

What this polling worryingly shows is that much of the platform of the contemporary British far right chimes with wider societal beliefs. Whether it be Islam and Muslims, free speech, or a sense of betrayal by an 'elite', the central campaign points being used by the far right have widespread support. While it is overly simplistic to say this is the sole reason for the 'mainstreaming' and growth of the British far right, it seems likely that this is a contributing factor. When talking about the mainstreaming of the far right it is less a matter of traditional far-right politics, namely crude racism, anti-immigrant racism, antisemitism and vitriolic homophobia having become acceptable in British society; in fact, while there are still problems with these issues, they remain, for the most part, beyond the pale for the majority of people. The more extreme elements of the British far right that still campaign around these issues have no electoral success at all and attract tiny numbers. The elements of the far right currently growing and attracting supporters are those individuals and groups, especially those gathered around Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, that consciously eschew this sort of extremism and even claim to oppose it. Those who publicly limit their racism to Muslims, bemoan the supposed suppression of their rights and freedoms and claim to represent the oppressed 'people' versus a corrupt 'elite' echo the views of much larger sections of the British public and thus have found success in attracting larger numbers than at any time since the 1930s. ■

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