

# EXPOSING THE FAR RIGHT: briefing paper #1



# **EXPOSING THE FAR RIGHT: briefing paper #1**

**This is the first in what rs21 plans to be a series of papers containing analysis, reportage and strategies to address the threat posed by the Far Right in the UK.**

An **rs21** briefing paper

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# On Labelling Fascists

by Caliban's Revenge

On 9 June 2018, central London saw the largest demonstration organised by the far right for many years. Perhaps more than 15,000 assembled to protest "against extremism" and "to support free speech", but even the most casual observer would have found it hard to miss the Nazi salutes and Islamophobic rhetoric. Rather than "extremism" the target of this demonstration was plainly the entire Muslim community: the "free speech" the organisers seek to protect is the right to terrorise that community with impunity and to restore the pogrom that lurched across the country targeting Muslim communities under the banner of the English Defence League.

Having only recently seen the long, slow decline of the last upsurge in organised racist violence, many have been alarmed by this development. That alarm is well founded. The Manchester Arena Bombing last year, carried out by an attacker who is generally believed to have been a supporter of ISIS, was truly horrifying. The local response was, for the most part, magnificent - emphasising the determination of Mancunians not to allow their communities to be torn apart by fear or bigotry. But inevitably incidents like this have given the far right an opportunity to restore their legitimacy. However, the problem isn't just a local one.

All over the world we have seen the mainstreaming of far-right politics. In some places it has helped truly reprehensible governments come into power, but the neoliberal centre has also courted this tendency in the face of growing dissatisfaction with crisis and austerity. An emerging international of bigotry was a key feature of Saturday's march, with Dutch racist Geert Wilders addressing the crowd and one-time-Svengali of the Trump administration Steve Bannon (who presently stalks the beer halls of Europe like a crypto-fascist plague horse) expressing his support. Sinister elements like these bankrolled the demonstration last Saturday, and back the factions of the Football Lad's Alliance that were its key organisers.

The left response to this rapidly emerging movement has, so far, not been cohesive. At most 400 courageous anti-racists turned up to the counter-protest, despite the fact that actions called by the FLA and its schism, the DFLA, have been building support over the last year. There is a long and established tradition of anti-fascism in this country going all the way back to the Battle of Cable Street in the 1930s, which is one reason why - unlike on the continent - there hasn't been a really successful political manifestation of the fascist right here for many years. But in the wake of the current resurgence of the far right, some socialists have urged caution.

The FLA, building on the dying embers of the EDL and general hostility to migrants fostered by the referendum, had already seen some success with their coded rhetoric against "extremism" - but the shift to focusing on



white anxieties about “freedom of speech” (essentially the right to call your neighbour a n\*\*\*\*\*) has significantly broadened their appeal. Some people who would never have supported the EDL, and who don’t condone the violent language directed at Muslim communities, are expressing support for Tommy Robinson’s “political imprisonment” for “telling the truth about Muslim grooming gangs”. Robinson’s arrest for very nearly causing the case prosecuting a group of child molesters to collapse, was in reality a carefully orchestrated ploy to turn the former EDL leader into a martyr. The ploy worked, and Robinson’s imprisonment was the central theme of the demonstration.

Those wary of reflexively employing previous anti-fascist strategies against this new formation have pointed to this wider layer of soft racists; working class men and women – some of them Labour voters – alienated by a sometimes bombastic impulse to “call out” imperfect attitudes to oppressed minorities and sexual politics. Some have cringed at the characterisation of the new movement as “fascist”, pointing out that they attracted families and the young, and that the really hardened sieg heiling knuckle draggers were only a significant minority of last Saturday’s substantial crowds. People have also pointed to a political landscape that presents serious obstacles to the growth of a mass nationalist movement, principally the huge support for the left leadership of the Labour party and the unprecedented growth of Labour and Momentum over the last few years. Likewise explicitly racist forces, certainly nothing to the right of UKIP, have been unable to develop a coherent political challenge since the collapse of the BNP at the ballot box, although the leadership of the EDL tried very hard to do so.

These people are right to caution against panicked responses to the re-emergence of the far right on the street. Torches have been lit all the way from Virginia to Athens, but the Reichstag isn’t burning yet. Likewise it is vital

that we understand the difference between ambivalent working class people who entertain racist views and the very small minority of determined and organised white nationalists who are at the core of these demonstrations. But understanding that doesn't mean withdrawing from the struggle to claim the public sphere, or failing to identify and confront fascism on the street.

I have seen three major revivals of the far right, and by "seen", I don't mean merely witnessed or even protested against: I mean I have been subject to them in a mortally terrifying and personal way. It's an experience shared by hundreds of thousands of Asians, African-Caribbeans, trade unionists, activists and LGBT individuals spanning generations. The collective memory of how those struggles were conducted, and ultimately won, is always in peril of being submerged under the equally important intelligence of the unique context in which each new battle emerges. While recognising that the terrain has changed and that the challenge of defeating racism now demands new strategies, it is just as vital that we draw on this collective memory. Because some debates that may seem new, are in fact very stale, and because some comrades do not understand what is happening now - because they do not really understand what happened then.

The accelerated rise of the National Front was not predicated in the first instance on the support of hardened racists or the lumpen/petit bourgeois cabals that are the core of fascist movements. The late 60s saw major demonstrations by working class whites threatened by post war immigration and inspired by Enoch Powell's apocalyptic "Rivers of blood" speech. Many of their number were organised workers with a tradition of support for the Labour movement. The NF began as principally an electoral organisation, but in response to the emergence of mass anti-migrant demonstrations began to shift to calling street marches, public stunts and limited forays into the labour movement. As the ballot box showed increasingly diminishing returns, the street became the focus of the group's activities. Breaking the NF, well into the 80s, meant breaking generalised racist sentiments against migrants from the specific street manifestations organised by, but well beyond, the NF. Central to that struggle was painting National Front activity as organised by Nazis.

That characterisation was crucial to the decline in support for the NF, and nobody learnt that better than the fascists themselves. Jean-Marie Le Pen of the NF's French sister organisation pioneered a "third way" approach which emphasised the need to clean up the image of the far right - to look and talk respectably, to play down the ethnic cleansing and instead talk about "illegal migrants" and "moral degeneracy". In the UK the BNP adopted this strategy and employed it to motivate ordinary non fascists to vote for Derrick Beacon in the 1990s and then other equally vile candidates in the noughties. They talked about the plight of the "white working class" and would-be Führer Nick Griffin wore a tie and got invited on Question Time as if he was a proper human being, and not the animate slime who had actively celebrated the extermination of the European Jews. The great majority who voted for the BNP weren't truly white

supremacists, but harboured anxieties about jobs and economic insecurity manipulated through the warped carnival mirror of mainstream racism, not just by the BNP, but by the whole political establishment. These people weren't prepared to support the BNP once a very long and protracted struggle had demonstrated that they weren't "legitimate" politicians. Again this was about characterising their activities and milieu as fascist.

The EDL did not begin as an explicit roving pogrom of violent drunks; their largest demonstrations, which numbered in the thousands, in fact closely resembled the FLA formation we saw in London on 9 June. They involved mostly very ordinary people with soft racist attitudes to the dangers of "radical Islam" and white anxieties about freedom of speech, and like all far-right movements, they included a minority of black and even Asian supporters. I have been directly confronted by black EDL members raving about immigration, presumably without any sense of irony. The UAF (Unite against Fascism) strategy was fraught with compromise and its human resources were limited and politically confused, but again the crucial issue was, as ever, isolating the hard racists from the soft.

The perception of Saturday's demonstration as an exception to this pattern comes from its sheer size and, beyond that, the confidence of people with no connection to the far right to express support, however guarded, for some of its objectives. I am not aware of any far-right demonstration in my life time that comes anywhere near the FLA led event in terms of sheer head count, but as people correctly point out- the number of card carrying fascists has not in fact increased by a factor of 10 in the last year. As such the great majority of people on this demonstration may be racists, but they are not hardened fascists and a minority of them may even be turned off by violence they may have witnessed on the day. But this doesn't change the nature of the core of this movement or where it arises, but rather the favourable circumstances under which they have broadened their appeal.

It's important to acknowledge that an anti-fascist strategy is not sufficient to defeat racism. Ethnic and religious oppression have deep roots in our society. Hardened, white supremacists, holocaust deniers and violent Islamophobes are a very small minority of the population at large, but racism itself does not survive merely because of those with outspoken racist views. National identity is a vital part of the thinking that maintains the status quo. It tells the poor that they have interests in common with the people that keep them poor, it tells people with nothing that they have this intangible magical quality that makes them better, even more human, than people who don't belong to the club. Racial, religious and ethnic inequality have complex origins, but they are primarily sustained by the importance of national and racial identity to maintaining an intrinsically unequal society. But that doesn't mean that racism is inevitable or cannot be defeated.

Successive battles have managed to win a public sphere in which being labelled a racist is generally considered a damning indictment and a significant

section of the working class has been won to conscious anti-racism. We live in a racist society which discriminates against ethnic minorities and terrorises migrants, but that doesn't mean that we can simply say that "most people are racist". People's views aren't static, and many of our notions and sentiments are often not even very clearly defined. People have contradictory ideas and until circumstances lead them to form firm convictions, those ideas are likely to be fluid. The great majority of people today agree that it's "bad" to be racist, but what exactly constitutes racism is a matter of the most intense struggle.

Perpetual imperialist war in the Middle East, global economic crisis, austerity and the focusing prism of the referendum on EU Membership have significantly increased the intensity of that struggle. As such, the presence of a relatively broad, potentially mass far-right movement is a product of that growing tension and not its cause. Many different kinds of battles will need to be fought in order to push the balance of ideas in our favour. We must build on the general outrage against Theresa May's "hostile environment", fight for grass roots resistance to its manifestation in our everyday lives - passport checks in NHS hospitals, immigration police raiding our market stalls and our rail stations. We need to renew organised efforts to chase the insidious agenda of 'Prevent' from our colleges and classrooms, to get students and teachers to band together in a collective refusal to consent. We need to support and build initiatives like Black Lives Matter and the Yarl's Wood demonstrations that highlight the brutalisation and incarceration of people of colour by the authorities. We need to renew a consensus against imperialist war. Above all we need movements to acknowledge the interdependence of these fractional battles. To push for a united continuum of anti-racism and the hegemony of anti-capitalist ideas within it.

So yes, anti-fascism is a woefully insufficient response to the very immediate challenges of an intensified battle against mainstream racism. But equally, an anti-fascist strategy is more essential within a general anti-racist struggle than ever precisely because of the mainstreaming of far-right ideas. Just as racism is not something unique to a far-right minority, fascism is not, in reality, "about" racism. Fascism as both an ideology and as a historical moment, is about capitalism resorting to popular authoritarianism and reaction as a means to deal with social crisis. The left can, and will, argue with itself all the way to the firing squad about what exactly is the definition of fascism and I don't intend to rehearse that discussion here. It's clear that there are those that are indisputably identifying with the political traditions of the Falange and the National Socialists, and then others that merely run closely parallel to them. But it suffices to say that if you have groups or individuals that espouse anti-democratic sentiments, the suspension of human rights, the suppression of minorities or women, hostility to trade unions and other workers organisations and call for a renewal of a mythical past - you are dealing with fascists. While the milieu of the new street movement cannot be described in these terms these are the ideas at its centre. Fascism runs in its bloodstream.

Equivocation because of the broadness of these movements would be a historic mistake. Of course, a lot of people on these demonstrations aren't



Nazis. But when ambivalent people march they're drawn into the logic of the political centre of these events. Action changes context, and context dictates ideas. People who are unsure what to think, but are scared and feel something must be done will respond to disciplined groups with definite objectives and a clear world view. Anti-fascism has never been about targeting the periphery. It has never been the solution to a racist society, but it is vital to breaking the opposition to real social equality. The deadly enemies of democracy. The moniker of fascism is correct, and strategically apt, in this context.

A mass movement that can mobilise against this street movement is, for all migrants and Muslims, a life-and-death necessity. A popular culture that celebrates multiculturalism and emphatically rejects this movement is a necessity. Identifying the engine of this movement, the rotten mind that steers and directs its development, as fascist is a necessity.

The emergence of new right-wing forces with an orientation on the street necessitates a renewal of the anti-fascist strategy. One that is both able to develop a mass presence on the street, capable of confronting the far right but building far beyond minoritarian squads, but also one that is relating to a broader political and social challenge to the mainstreaming of nationalist discourse and the policy of hostility to migrants. The material basis for this renewal lies in the communities who are the principal target of this aggression, the many thousands of people drawn to the possibility of a left Labour government and the diverse feminist and anti-racist campaigns that have struggled to sustain themselves in the absence of such a cohesive focus. Serious barriers stand in the way of tapping that potential.

The capacity of the Muslim community to organise for self-defence was a key aspect of the eventual exhaustion of the English Defence League, but in contrast to the experience of the 1970s and 1990s, communities were rarely motivated to generalise that challenge beyond an immediate or local threat. Winning that argument within minority and migrant communities is vital, and can only be achieved by proving in practice the importance of broader anti-racist solidarity. Similarly, individual Labour and momentum groups have, in some places, played a vital role in local health campaigns, the movement to win justice after the Grenfell fire or the incredible battles against gentrification, but there is also great frustration about what appears to be its leaderships disinterest in campaigning beyond elections. Too easily the hope that a Corbyn government might be a step towards a better world collapses into the inertia of waiting for a destined Labour government that, without a mass movement ready to push beyond it, might never arrive. Soon the right will remobilise to intimidate and brutalise Muslim and migrant communities. The shift to stand against them needs to begin today.

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# Know Your Enemy: the Tommy Robinson movement

by David Renton

## International organising on the Right

When journalists try to make sense of the Tommy Robinson movement, which has its next major mobilisation this Saturday, 14 June, they describe it as the product of domestic factors: the demise of the BNP in around 2010, its replacement by the EDL as a new kind of Islamophobic street movement on the right, Brexit, the attempt by the Football Lads Alliance in 2017 to revive the EDL model, the rise of Corbynism and the failure of Theresa May in last year's general election to win a majority around a programme of authoritarian (strong and stable) Conservatism, etc...

All of these factors are part of the re-emergence of a street-based right, but even to add them all together is to miss the point.

Above all else, the Tommy Robinson movement is the local chapter of a global far right.

You can see this in the people who speak at the Tommy Robinson events: Geert Wilders, the leader of the Dutch People's Party, Milo Yiannopoulos best known for the part he played in Gamergate in the US, Raheem Kassam, until recently the editor in chief at Breitbart's London office.

You can see the international character of the Tommy Robinson movement also in the people who have signed the petition calling for his release: around half of whom have been from outside the UK, with more than fifty thousand people signing it in each of America and Australia.

This international aspect provides the new street movement with confidence, funds, with access to media, and a model of how to organise.

In future articles, I will explain who the FLA are and how Robinson has rushed to a leadership role. Here though I want to set out briefly the main features of the far right since 2016 and how that context shapes this new movement on the right.

## The global far right is different from the right of twenty years ago

When I first began writing about the far right, almost the only model of far right politics than anyone talked about was a group of "Euro-fascist" parties, principally the MSI in Italy, the FN in France, and the Freedom Party in Austria. These parties were successful in elections and in the case of Italy and Austria by the 1990s were on the verge of joining (very short-lived) conservative-far right governments.

Yet for all their popular and electoral success, the parties had their roots in attempts, after 1945, to found successor parties to the interwar fascists. In France, for example, the FN was set up by a fascist party whose members had been involved in repeated incidents of street violence, Ordre Nouveau (ON).

The shift from ON to FN was an attempt to broaden a fascist party and to



repackage it, initially by pulling leading figures from other fascist groups and then through electoralism, but almost all the leading figures of the FN had been in fascist parties (including Jean Marie Le Pen: a former member of ON).

One of the ways in which Marxists distinguished ourselves from liberal commentators was by insisting that these parties were still fascist: i.e. there was a direct continuity in their leaderships between the parties of the 1930s, they were loyal to the legacy of the 1930s (hence Le Pen's repeated remarks calling the Holocaust a detail of history), and that the parties attempted to balance between street and electoral politics, refusing to subordinate the former to the latter, and leaving open the possibility of a fascist struggle for power.

If you compare the global far right of 2018 its predecessors of twenty years ago, the first and most basic change is how much greater the variety is now on the far right compared to twenty years ago: there are Islamophobic street movements (the EDL, Pegida), there are Islamophobic political parties which have emerged in parallel to Euro-fascism but on a different ideological basis and without any interest in street politics (the Fortuyn list), some of the Euro-fascist parties have evolved into moderate right wing parties or collapsed (the MSI), other are recognisably in continuity with the model of the 1990s (the FN, the Freedom Party).

One of the clearest indicators of a fascist (as opposed to a non-fascist far-right) party is whether it maintains a private militia, to carry out attacks on racial and political opponents and potentially the state.

In the last decade, there have been just three mass parties in Europe which have maintained their own separate militia: Jobbik in Hungary, Greece's Golden Dawn and the People's Party Our Slovakia. None of them has prospered in recent years, not even during the favourable circumstances following Brexit and Trump.

The dominant incarnation of the global far right rejects not just fascism, but “politics” itself. In the 1990s the dominant way of doing politics on the far right involved a fascist leadership training its members into a distinct fascist tradition and then the members changing the voters. These were parties which had a very strong ideological mission and saw their role as being to induct cadres into it.

So in Italy, for example, even though the politicians of the MSI/AN had by the 1990s largely given up on terrorism, the party retained a youth movement, into which new recruits were trained. They learned the names of the fascist dead. Where their people were elected locally, campaigns grew up to rename their streets in honour of the fascist martyrs. When, in France, the FN took power locally, they removed leftwing papers from municipal libraries and replaced them with FN newspapers. Libraries were ordered to stock the shelves with writers such as Evola.

In Britain, the BNP had a routine of monthly members’ meetings, at which speakers would explain how the events of the day could be fitted in to a fascist ideology. There was a party magazine (*Identity*), which members were expected to read and sell.

In its present incarnation, the far right does not have a cadre model: recruits are made principally online. For the last two decades, there has been a very significant increase, internationally, in anti-Islamic racism and in the policing of borders. In a climate where racism has already been growing, the far right seeks to recruit through cultural dynamics which favour it. Using the popular cliches of the 1960s, the right is trying to swim among the people. It is not swimming against the tide.

So far, the left has failed to develop a model of how to confront the parts of the far right which operate close to the mainstream. The left knows very well how to confront fascists. In the United States, Richard Spencer’s career has not recovered from the punch that landed on the day of Donald Trump’s inauguration, from Charlottesville, or from anti-fascist protests since.

We have no comparable strategy for dealing with the non-fascist far right. That’s why tens of millions of Americans voted for Donald Trump and indeed why Trump is on approval ratings of 40 percent plus in the current polls.

At a certain point, we need to stop congratulating ourselves for the demise of the likes of Richard Spencer and confront the much larger problem which is the proximity of the electoral far right to power.

The global far right is growing through convergence with other forces. The Tommy Robinson campaign is itself a convergence between three models of organising: a right-wing social movement approach embodied in the FLA, the post-EDL politics of Robinson himself, and the present leaders of UKIP who sees in his movement a chance for them to rebuild their party.

In this way, it echoes what are much larger processes whereby people are forming alliances despite originating at different points in the spectrum between street and electoral politics. So, in the United States, Donald Trump ran in many ways as a conventional Republican candidate. So much so that - despite a widely publicised #neverTrump campaign, registered Republican voters were more likely to vote for him than registered Democratic voters were to vote for Hillary Clinton.

But if Donald Trump ran as an “ordinary” right-wing Republican, his campaign derived much of its energy from an alliance between him and his campaign manager Steve Bannon who was, by any standards, a politician of the far right.

At the end of the 1990s, government coalitions of far right and Conservative parties in Italy and Austria were subject to mass protests and collapsed within a few months. By contrast, the convergence of the centre- and far right has produced a durable coalition in Austria in 2017 and seems set to be leading to durable far right government in Italy (as well as Hungary, Turkey, India, etc etc).

## **The global far right is profiting from a popular rejection of globalisation**

Part of the way in which the Tommy Robinson movement holds its people together is through a shared fear of betrayal over Brexit.

In the same way, Donald Trump – whose Presidency seemed doomed a mere six months ago – has been able to revive itself, post-Bannon, by returning to the politics of America First and beginning trade wars with China and the US.

The last twelve months have seen largest street protests by the far right in decades: in October 2017, a march of 10,000 people by the Football Lads Alliance; on 6 May this year, a ‘Day for Freedom’ march of 5,000 people, and on 9 June, a march of perhaps 15,000 people calling for Tommy Robinson to be freed. There have also been protests in Manchester and Birmingham with around 2-3,000 people taking part in each.

By contrast, the largest EDL demonstrations in 2011-2012 in Luton saw a maximum of 3,000 people march. The National Front demonstration through Lewisham in 1977 which was famously confronted by anti-fascists saw around 800 supporters of the Front take part. You have to go back as far as the 1930s to the last time that the British far right was able to mobilise numbers comparable to today.

## **Rejecting the BNP**

The starting point has to be the English Defence League, which is a model both to Tommy Robinson (the former leader of the EDL) and to the DFLA. The EDL was made up of people who had been on the margins of fascist parties (the NF and the BNP) but disliked them and wanted to create something new.

The Front and the BNP were top down parties for the transmission of politics from leadership to cadre and then to an audience. The NF and the BNP had a message which was either that Hitler had been right (the NF) or that Britain needed a modern nationalist party like the Front National in France (the BNP). Within each party nationalist traditions were passed on, from the leadership down and from old members to new. Elections were used to build influence, to make the party appear bigger and to test the extent to which the

party was winning supporters and converting them to its politics.

The demise of the BNP from 2010 onwards and the emergence of the EDL broke with this model. The EDL was a right-wing social movement and not a party. It recruited first football fans and then online. From its start, the EDL was an organisation without subs or speaker meetings. Unlike its predecessors there were neither official magazines nor tables of approved literature. The EDL did not have members; it did not tell its supporters that they were fighting for a minority tradition (fascism) which was trying to make itself popular again until it had majority support. Rather the EDL borrowed ideas which were already mainstream (that Islam produces terrorists, that the English are being punished by multiculturalism, etc.) and sought to push them further than conventional politics allowed.

Tommy Robinson was a popular leader of the EDL but he made a number of decisions which limited the EDL's potential for growth. To distance the EDL from the BNP, Robinson promoted a clique of non-BNP speakers who were pro-Israel, pro-LGBT and antagonised the core members who did not see either of these issues as a priority. The EDL had to deal with the problem of opposition on a significant scale. In addition, it never had any coherent notion of what to do with its members other than to call more demonstrations. This was a plausible way of building a movement, the people who took part found the events enjoyable and wanted to do more of them. But once they had reached their greatest size (i.e. around 2,000 people), their novelty wore off. This was not a movement which had any strategy to take on, or still less take over, the state. And there was nowhere for the EDL to go other than to call yet another demonstration which then turned out to be no larger than the one before. Tommy Robinson himself grew frustrated with this model and in 2013 left the EDL, supposedly forever...

## **Trying what was tried before**

The FLA was launched after the 2017 terrorist attacks and also after Labour's success in last year's general election. One theme of its supporters is their intense dislike of Jeremy Corbyn, Dianne Abbott and Mayor of London Sadiq Khan, all of whom are seen to be irredeemably soft on terrorism. The responses of the Football Lads to Abbott and Khan personally also exhibit more than a little old-style racism.

The FLA had an equivocal relationship with the EDL. As the FLA saw it, the English Defence League produced a model of how to organise and showed that there was an audience for its intended "anti-extremist" (i.e. anti-Muslim) politics. On the other hand, the EDL was seen to have gone too far, and failed by allowing its critics to present it as far-right. If a particular idea was floated and the leadership of the FLA disliked it, they would say that their critics were just reproducing the EDL. Tommy Robinson himself was banned from the first FLA events.

The key individual at this stage was a man called John Meighan, a Spurs fan who describes himself as a "property manager", i.e. a junior manager for a private company that specialises in building hospital buildings on PFI contracts.

At 32, Meighan was younger than most other of the first wave of FLA



supporters, and dependent on an older generation who went back to the hooligan battles of the 1980s. The FLA appears to have had an informal leadership of people who presented themselves as the leaders of local groups of football hooligans. Only in a few cases did these firms have any discernible links to the far right.

The anti-political nature of early FLA events was expressed in the rule that supporters were banned from chanting, slogans, banners (other than those produced centrally) and flags (other than the St Georges Flag and Union Jack).

The FLA portrayed itself as a movement of ordinary people with very little politics other than a dislike of terrorism. Football is a working-class milieu in which most FLA supporters are treated as 'one of us'. Some FLA supporters (including members of the leadership) are pushy or middle class - most aren't. Some are ideological right-wingers. Again, most aren't.

### **Robinson and the FLA: the beginnings of a relationship**

The first sign that the FLA would be unable to keep Robinson out could be seen at the October 2017 demonstration, which was attended by Robinson supposedly in a new capacity of social media reporter on the far right. Robinson was mobbed as he attended the march, repeatedly applauded and plainly had a stronger personal following than Meighan or any of the other leaders of the FLA.

At this stage, it seems that Robinson was uncertain whether he wanted to be pulled into the leadership of the new movement. He had repeatedly declared that he wanted to have no part in organised politics. In 2014 and 2015, Robinson's line was that he was keeping away from his past; although there was



some backsliding and from early 2016, Robinson had been promoting Pegida UK as a possible route for him back to a leadership role in something like the EDL.

When Robinson is asked to explain how he could have gone from disavowing all politics to a possible return, his own explanation is that he had no choice. All he ever wanted to do was give up politics and return to his previous career as a painter and decorator. But ever since he has got involved in far right politics he has been subject to monitoring by the police, and at various times he has been prosecuted, had his property confiscated, etc. The legacy of Robinson's involvement in the EDL is a huge social media platform. Who could blame him, he says, for seeking to use it?

By late 2017, Robinson was plainly considering a return to far right politics. The main difficulty for Robinson was that Darren Osborne was awaiting trial for his terrorist attacks (initially, an intention to kill Jeremy Corbyn which then became the attack on the Finsbury Park mosque). As Osborne was preparing the attacks, he received twitter messages from Robinson. The first told him that "There is a nation within a nation forming just beneath the surface of the UK... built on hatred, violence and Islam," the second (sent just five days before Osborne carried out the attacks), claimed that refugees from Syria and Iraq had raped a white woman in Sunderland.

The former EDL leader may well have been calculating that if he did throw everything at politics, he would be in real danger of a prosecution as an accessory to that attack. Given that Osborne was sentenced to 43 years in jail, the risk to Robinson if he pushed himself too far into the public light was very high indeed. Several months were to pass before Robinson decided that he was safe to return.



## Turning protest into money

Meanwhile the founder of the FL John Meighan was becoming increasingly isolated. Meighan (indeed like Robinson) is an activist with a very strong sense of the need to 'marketise' his social relationships. One of his first acts was to register the FLA as a for-profit company (Football Lads Alliance Limited) complete with its own online merchandise shop selling branded clothing. This went down badly with other FLA activists, many of whom are from manual working class backgrounds and were annoyed at the thought that their time was being used to make money for Meighan.

By this March, a Democratic Football Lads Alliance had been launched with no platform other than to remove Meighan. Both the FLA and DFLA called rival marches, and the DFLA's were clearly larger.

At around this time, two significant groups became interested in this rising movement. One was UKIP, whose new leader Gerard Batten (pictured, top) who has been a regular presence on all the main marches since the spring. It is worth noting that the EDL never attempted alliances with parties on the scale of UKIP. The DFLA's alliance with UKIP represents to some extent a moderation of its politics; on the other hand, it is also a means to funds and an audience on a much larger scale than before.

The other was the very popular Birmingham Justice4the21 campaign, possibly the most significant ally that the British far right has had since the anti-immigration campaigns of the 1960s.

I have argued that the Free Tommy Robinson campaign is the domestic expression of the rise of the far right internationally and described how it begins with the launch of the Football Lads Alliance last year.

## Free speech for Hate speech?

On 6 May this year, various parts of the far right came together to hold a Free Speech demonstration in Whitehall. Billed a 'Day for Freedom', the purpose of the event was to protest Twitter's decision to close down Tommy Robinson's account, and to link this to what the organisers' claimed was a 'war on freedom of expression'.

As explained in the previous article, the immediate context to the closure of Robinson's account was his encouragement of Darren Osborne, who had initially intended to kill Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, before settling on a terrorist attack against Muslims praying at the Finsbury Park mosque in Islington. The 'speech' that needed to be protected was, in other words, Robinson's support for murder.

Various figures declared their support for Robinson; most were C-list figures: including Raheem Kassam, recently at Breitbart London, and Anne-Marie Waters whose For Britain party won a mere 266 votes in the Lewisham East byelection. By far the most important was Gerard Batten, whose leadership of UKIP has been

characterised by repeated attempts to woo the extra-parliamentary far right.

On the day, websites such as Hope not Hate reported the presence of any number of open fascists on the march, and it is true that compared to 2017 when the FLA was being set up, the initial ban on open politics seemed to have been dropped.

That said, many of the groups present on the march (eg Generation Identity) were there in small numbers and were peripheral to the event. Rather than seeing GI and similar as the cadres of a fascist revival, the largest numbers seem to have been football supporters and Tommy Robinson online's fans. The event became a turgid open-air mass meeting with Robinson speaking last.

## Free Tommy

Robinson's arrest and detention later that month has – plainly – increased the potential for the new movement. It has consolidated his decision to return to politics (he is already in jail, there is nothing he could lose if he was prosecuted for his involvement in Finsbury Park). A vast number of international far-rightists have spread the news of his imprisonment, which has increased his audience and his funding, and brought in new group of supporters.

There is no little irony to a movement calling for Robinson to be freed where he *pleaded guilty* to contempt of charges, and was already subject to a suspended sentence which he has never challenged. His lawyers have submitted an appeal to his new sentence, but what are they going to argue: that his 13 month detention should be reduced to 12.5?

The demonstration in his support in June 2018 copied previous mobilisations: it was organised in central London, near the institutions of state power, but as far as possible from the politicised black communities where previous versions of the far right have come under attack (Lewisham, Southall, Walthamstow...).

Tommy Robinson's supporters outnumbered the left very considerably, by around 15,000 to 200. They did not attack the left, showing again that this is a far right and not a fascist movement; from its perspective the left is an annoyance rather than its main strategic enemy.

They did attack the police, something which the far right has previously done all in its power to avoid. This reflects a subtle shift in the movement from its origins in the FLA/DFLA. At least initially, you were talking about a campaign which had a clear pyramid structure, from groups of football casuals who were organised around particular clubs, up to a DFLA Council who were the leadership.

By contrast, now that the Tommy Robinson fans are in control, the campaign is run by a much smaller group of people who are not accountable to anyone nor do they have a network of supporters, other than a great mass of online followers, to whom they speak as a leader might address a crowd – through a virtual megaphone.

The difference between these two models is that the former involves

intermediary kinds of authority between the rank and file and the leadership. The latter does away with them, which means that there is no-one on demonstrations to tell people where to go or what to do, other than wait for Robinson or Batten to speak. It is a much larger movement but also more fragile and harder to control.

## **Seeing the movement as a whole**

The Free Tommy campaign does not have a fascist programme, its supporters see themselves as being in a cultural conflict with the state but their main enemies are Muslims and liberals not socialists. It has no ambition purge the state or any inkling of how to challenge it other than (as with the EDL) simply calling more and more demonstrations. Until, inevitably, the marches reach their maximum number, cease to be exciting, and the campaigns supporters start to look for something new.

That 'next stage' could, in principle, be some kind of fascist party. Although in recent years where similar movements have emerged and declined the people who have gained have in general been electoral rather than fascist parties (eg Germany: where the anti-Islamic street movement Pegida created the conditions for the AfD).

When the left has conceived of taking on fascism we have assumed that its weak point is the streets. We have assumed that if only the great British public could see a street army of fascist sympathisers using violence the watching audience would grasp they were fascists, would be horrified and reject them.

Very little of this equation works in quite the same way it once did: this is a movement whose strength is on the streets, which has no fear of using violence, and is not guilty about its fascism.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the far right revival is its dependence on allies who are much closer than it is to mainstream politics.

One example is UKIP, which won just 1.84% of the vote in the 2017 general election, but not so long ago had two MPs and still claims the support of three members of the House of Lords. If UKIP ever wants to return to where it was, then such stunts as Gerard Batten covering his face with masking tape and pledging his support to far-right street warrior Tommy Robinson is plainly the wrong place to start.

UKIP brings to the campaign infrastructure, resources and people. It is involved because it wants to take the energy of this street movement and draw the people involved back into UKIP and into electoral politics.

But its involvement is controversial within UKIP: Nigel Farage is no Robinson supporter. Batten has said that there will be another UKIP leadership election as soon as spring 2019. Farage is already threatening to stand against him.

Apart from UKIP, the other major institutional ally for the new campaign has been justice4the21, a Birmingham campaign for a proper inquest into the 1974 pub bombings (i.e. an inquest which names the killers). This is an

extremely well-rooted local campaign, presenting itself as the equivalent of, say, the Hillsborough justice campaign. It has hundreds of local volunteers and an income in at least the tens of thousands of pounds. Julie Hambleton the key force in the campaign is closely allied with the DFLA, regularly uses her platforms in the Birmingham press to call for people to join the DFLA, and has called joint DFLA/JF21 events.

Meanwhile JF21 has been supported by Labour MPs and any number of mainstream justice campaigns, for example, Liberty, which (prior to J421's support for the DFLA) awarded the campaign its Long March to Justice Award.

There is something truly extraordinary about the contrast between JF21's role in Birmingham, where it is almost universally eulogised, and its role as a national prop of the DFLA and therefore of the Tommy Robinson campaign.

If anti-fascists are serious about confronting the new far right, then we could be spending our time not merely opposing Tommy Robinson's supporters on the streets but challenging the right's more moderate allies.

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