

**‘NO SURRENDER TO THE TALIBAN’: FOOTBALL HOOLIGANISM, ISLAMOPHOBIA  
AND THE RISE OF THE ENGLISH DEFENCE LEAGUE**

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**Abstract**

On a number of occasions throughout 2009 and 2010 violent clashes occurred between white and Asian males, anti-fascist demonstrators and the police in city centres in the United Kingdom. These disturbances involved a new organisation, the English Defence League (EDL), which claims to oppose ‘radical Islam’. This article charts the growth of the EDL and the affiliated Casuals United, and examines their motivations and ideologies. It assesses their links with football hooligan ‘firms’, and whether these links mean that the EDL has a large pool of violent ‘footsoldiers’ at its disposal, and concludes that the EDL’s Islamophobic views and provocative street army tactics mean that it poses the most serious threat to public order and community cohesion since the heyday of the National Front in the 1970s.

**Keywords:**

English Defence League, Casuals United, Media, Islamophobia, Far-Right, Football Hooliganism, Public Order.

**Introduction**

The summer and autumn of 2009 witnessed growing concern in the United Kingdom over a number of disturbances in city centres involving a range of new, seemingly ‘far-right’ activist groups. Positioning themselves in vocal opposition to ‘radical Islam’ and ‘Islamic extremism’, these groups organised a series of protest marches in the latter half of that year that on several occasions erupted into violent clashes between the protesters, counter-demonstrators and the police.

Incorporated amongst the marchers were several related factions, including Casuals United, the English Defence League (EDL), Welsh Defence League, Scottish Defence League, March for England, United British Alliance, British Citizens Against Islam Extremists and Stop the Islamification of Europe (Gable, Cressy and Woodson, 2009). The most prominent of these were Casuals United and the EDL, two overlapping and inter-linking groups that have emerged out of the fringes of England's domestic football hooligan subculture that has long been associated by commentators (although only occasionally accurately, see Armstrong, 1999; Stott and Pearson, 2007) with the politics of the extreme right. Utilising twenty-first century methods of networking, and functioning in a world where domestic banning orders<sup>1</sup> and prohibitive ticket pricing make football a less attractive arena in which to seek physical confrontation, these two groups have been portrayed in the press as twenty-first century harbingers of far-right extremist politics (see, for example, Kerbaj 2009).

In this article we offer a preliminary examination of the origins and development of the EDL and Casuals United, and suggest that the emergence of concern at 'extremist Islam' is a new form of the traditional coupling of reactionary politics and football hooligan/casual culture. Through an analysis of media coverage, EDL and Casuals United websites and material, YouTube videos and Internet networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, we critically chart the alarming rise of this new, anti-Islamic movement. This approach is complemented by material from original research in the form of covert ethnographic fieldwork, which has involved one of the authors gaining access to EDL networks and hence attending a number of demonstrations ostensibly as someone who sympathises with its ideas. Whilst doing this the researcher took extensive fieldnotes which feed into this article.

We suggest that the media's narrow fixation with race reflects a failure of many in the press to understand the more complex dynamics at play, and in particular the interplay between Islamophobia, ethnicity, race and the politics of identity and nation which are shaping the groups' ideology (Law, 2010; Fakete, 2009; Chakraborti, 2007). For that reason we argue that the EDL and Casuals United, while sharing some characteristics with establishing far-right parties, mark a different manifestation of the fusing of football hooligan casual culture and extremist politics and pose the most significant

threat to community cohesion in Britain's inner-cities since the heyday of the National Front in the mid-to-late 1970s.

### **The Birth of the English Defence League**

On 24th May 2009 in Luton a group calling themselves the United People of Luton marched through the centre of the town to protest against a small gathering of Muslim extremists (Ahle Sunnah al Jamah, a splinter group from the banned Islamic extremist faction Al-Muhajiroun) that had abused soldiers from the 2nd Battalion the Royal Anglian Regiment as they paraded through the town on 10 March 2009 following the regiment's return from service in Iraq. On that day the collection of around 15 radical Muslim protesters waved placards with slogans including: 'Anglian Soldiers: Butchers of Basra', 'Anglian Soldiers: cowards, killers, extremists' and 'British Government Terrorist Government' while shouting abuse at the troops (Gable *et al.*, 2009). While the protest was small scale, the presence of television cameras from a regional news programme meant that the protest subsequently became a national news feature and the subject of widespread debate.

Much of that debate concerned the fact that not only had Ahle Sunnah al Jamah had been allowed to protest, but it had done so with police protection (Booth, Taylor and Lewis, 2009). This had reignited a debate concerning the rights of extreme Islamic groups to air their views which had first emerged followed protests in London outside the Danish embassy in February 2006. On that occasion demonstrators including Anjem Choudary (who was involved in organising the subsequent Luton anti-soldier protests) campaigned against the publication of twelve editorial cartoons, most of which depicted the prophet Muhammed, in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* the previous year. At that event, the police had initially failed to take action against a number of protesters who had wielded inflammatory banners pronouncing that those who offend Islam should be beheaded, and that 'Britain... 7/7 on its way', which prompted an outcry in the national press (Chakraborti and Garland, 2009).

What the Ahle Sunnah al Jamah 2009 protest did achieve was to act as a catalyst for the formation of the EDL. Prior to their actions a small but militant group existed in Luton and had previously demonstrated its opposition to Ahle Sunnah al Jamah's activities in the town, but following the March

2009 incident this collection of individuals decided to become more organised, and formed itself into the United People of Luton. As its self-proclaimed leader, Tommy Robinson, states:

In 2004 we held our own protest when we held a banner up saying 'Ban the Luton Taliban'. ... We realised we didn't just want them off the streets of Luton, we wanted them off the streets of Britain. When we saw Birmingham's demonstration [by a group called British Citizens Against Muslim Extremists] they were using the same slogans as us: 'We want our country back', 'Terrorists off the streets', 'Extremists out', 'Rule Britannia'. From there the EDL was set up (Booth *et al.*, 2009: 14).

On 24 May 2009 the fledgling EDL and Casuals United held an anti-Islamic extremism march in Luton with the permission of the police and the local council. The result was that a number of marchers broke away from the main body of demonstrators and entered Bury Park, a predominantly Muslim area of Luton, where, according to journalist Donal Macintyre (2009), shops and cars were subsequently damaged. It seemed ominously like the disturbances might trigger a repeat of the kind of riots witnessed in the summer of 2001 in several north-western towns in England. These disorders, dubbed the so-called 'Milltown riots' as they occurred in towns such as Oldham and Burnley traditionally associated with the textiles industry, had involved sustained violence between Asian and white youths and the police. They had been precipitated by agitation from far-right groups (Finney and Simpson, 2009; Copsey, 2008). Tensions were no doubt heightened by the fact that on 5 May, (as the BBC reported) in the run up to the protest, a large Islamic centre and mosque in the same area of the city, that had previously been the recipient of racial and religious hate mail, was subject to an arson attack (BBC, 2009a). Surprisingly, though, reporting of these events was largely limited to anti-fascist publications and websites such as *Searchlight* (see Woodson (2009) for example).

However, while the first demonstrations by the group were small-scale, attended by just dozens of supporters vocal in their opposition to Sharia law and 'radical Islam', during the latter months of 2009 the numbers attending EDL marches grew dramatically. Indeed, in a short space of time in Autumn 2009, the EDL developed into a significant street protest movement capable of mobilising over 1,000 protesters in different demonstrations in Birmingham (where there have been three separate marches), Nottingham, Manchester and Leeds. All of these received substantial press coverage after violent clashes between the EDL and anti-fascist protesters (for the most part from the organisation Unite Against Fascism (UAF)) and the police in Birmingham in September, resulted in a significant number

of arrests (Tweedie, 2009). In January 2010 the EDL boasted on its Twitter website that it had 8,013 followers on its official forum, and 12,038 people affiliated to its Facebook page (English Defence League, 2010), and in the space of a year its numbers attending protests have grown exponentially.

### **Violence, the EDL, Casuals United and Football Hooliganism**

Evidence gathered from ethnographic fieldwork, reports in the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight* as well as analysis of social networking sites such as Facebook, seems to suggest strong links between the EDL and football hooligan supporter groups. Coalescing under the banner of 'Casuals United', these groups share much of the EDL's anti-Islamic thinking, as their website shows:

We are an alliance of British Football Casuals of various different colours/races who have come together in order to create a massive, but peaceful protest group to force our Government to get their act in gear....Casuals United now has over 50 active branches, each doing their own thing, but ready to unite when needed. Violent extremists are on our streets, preaching hatred of the west, trying to incite young people to blow themselves up and commit acts of terror against us, and our Government and police are either turning a blind eye, and/or actively helping them in their aims. They wish to impose Sharia law upon us by stealth, and are already operating 85 of these courts in Britain behind closed doors (Casuals United, 2009a).

In such statements some of the contradictory nature of Casuals United's claims is revealed. For one, the group may position itself as being at odds with violent behaviour, yet paradoxically, the group made little if any attempt to hide its 'football casual' (or football 'hooligan') connection. Indeed, for the most part the supporters of Casuals United follow what might broadly be termed the 'casual style' long associated with violent football firms (see Treadwell, 2008), showing a particular penchant for expensive, exclusive designer clothing. In particular they tend to have an affinity for labels such as Stone Island, CP Company and Aquascutum, which are much in evidence at Casuals United and EDL gatherings. Moreover, the 'leader' of Casuals United makes no attempt to hide the background of many of those involved, stating that Casuals United is:

...a mixed-race group of English people, from businessmen and women, to football hooligans. I came up with the idea to unite football fans to forget their petty rivalries and come together in a national movement. There are a lot of people in their forties and fifties who used to be football hooligans but went on to settle down (Jenkins, 2009: 17).

The mobilisation of many football hooligan 'firms', witnessed during the covert ethnographic fieldwork by one of the authors, seems to suggest that the link between Casuals United and the EDL is a strong one and in many instances individuals have an affinity to both. Indeed, the range of hooligan groups spotted on EDL demonstrations and the wide geographical range from which they originate, suggests that, in many ways, the EDL and Casuals United are one and the same organisation.

For example, it is clear that an early and central concern of both Casuals United and the EDL has been what they regard as the 'imposition' of Sharia law in England. On 4 July 2009, the EDL picketed a 'Life under the Shari'ah' Islamic road show in Wood Green, North London, organised by the aforementioned Islamist extremist Anjem Choudary. On the same day the EDL and Casuals United (particularly members of its Birmingham branch) staged a voluble protest in Birmingham's Bullring 'against Muslim extremists that interrupted a British soldier's funeral' (notes from fieldwork, 4 July). While both events attracted little attention because they passed off relatively peacefully, a second protest in Birmingham, announced because of the failure of the 4 July protest to attract significant publicity, was to be the start of a much more disorderly phase for the EDL.

The date for this demonstration 'against Sharia law', organised by the EDL and Casuals United, was set for 8 August. Interest in attending the demonstration grew on internet forums the authors monitored before the march, with some discussion noting that the event fell on the eighth day of the eighth month (which, with 'H' as the eighth letter of the alphabet, translates for Nazis as 'HH' or 'Heil Hitler'). Indeed, while claims made by organisers were that the march was not racist, the protest had been heavily promoted on the fascist and white supremacist website 'Stormfront' (Hundal, 2009).

The march was preceded by an announcement that Unite Against Fascism, supported by the Respect Party, would hold a counter protest in Birmingham on the same day. There had been a growing climate of hostility between the UAF and EDL broadcast on internet forums and a large police presence was deployed (Kerbaj, 2009). While the counter-protest took place in the open space next to Birmingham's Bullring shopping centre at the bottom of the city's New Street area, members of the EDL and Casuals United gathered in several locations, at the opposite end of New Street in Victoria Square, where they unveiled anti-Islamic banners (Kerbaj, 2009).

While UAF had been in discussion with West Midlands Police and had fully co-operated with them throughout the planning stages of this event, the EDL and Casuals United had refused to negotiate or enter into any discourse with the police (although the police were aware of their intention to march that day (BBC, 2009a)). Perhaps inevitably, disorder later began when a rather drunken man with the EDL supporters at the lower end of New Street threw a can of lager over the top of a police cordon into the UAF protesters before brandishing a Union Jack flag (field notes, 8 August). At that point violence flared and there were reports that a number of assaults were committed by Asian men against young, white males in the vicinity, some of whom were clearly not part of the protest groups and had no links to the EDL whatsoever, but were assaulted because of their ethnicity and their close proximity to the protests (Booth and Jones, 2009). They were simply the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In the few days following the disorder internet forums capitalised on the fact that the police appeals to the public to name those involved, which included the release of CCTV images of suspects, revealed that many of those they were seeking were young Asian males, and also that many of those who were assaulted in the city centre were white. This allowed the EDL to circulate the story that the police had appeased 'radical Islamists' and that white people had been the victims of Muslim violence. The climate of the Birmingham protests had indeed been extremely charged, and field experience would suggest that the majority of violence did originate from UAF factions, even if there was some extreme provocation from EDL supporters.

Whatever the case, the July 2009 disorders in Birmingham appeared to act as a catalyst for the growth in the EDL and an expansion of its activities. Further demonstrations were staged towards the end of 2009, all of them, to one degree or another, descending into violence. At the following protest in Birmingham in September, 90 arrests were made as EDL supporters clashed with the police, the UAF and local Asian youths in a series of running battles in and around the city centre. More disorder occurred at a demonstration opposing the construction of a mosque in Harrow, north London, a few days later, and there were 30 arrests at a large EDL march in Manchester a month afterwards, while in Nottingham in early December even a security operation costing over £1m could not prevent substantial disorder surrounding an EDL protest attended by over 500 marchers chanting 'We want

our country back', 'No surrender to the Taliban' and 'Protect women, no to Sharia' (Townsend, 2009).

What these events appeared to reveal was the growing confidence within the EDL as its supporter base expanded. By the turn of the year it was being viewed as a serious threat to the community cohesion of many urban areas as its mixture of English patriotism, aggression and Islamophobia seemed to be welcomed by its target audience of disaffected and disenchanted white working class males involved with, or at the fringes of, the football hooligan scene (Lowles, 2009b). It appeared as though the EDL had been very successful in mobilising such hooligan groups who had historically been a target of far-right groups. To place this success in context, this article will now outline the historical relationship between the far-right and football hooliganism and will show how the EDL and Casuals United's activities form a new chapter in this troubled history.

### **Football and the Far-right: A Brief Historical Overview**

The historical ties between far-right groups and football fans, and in particular football hooligan firms, have often been overstated by the media and especially by the tabloid press that has been prone to simplistically linking football disorder with the activities of racist skinhead gangs (Back, Crabbe and Solomos, 2001). This is not to say, though, that some far-right organisations, notably the White Defence League in the 1950s, the National Front (NF) in the 1970s and the BNP in the 1990s, have not seen football supporters as potentially fertile ground for recruitment. Overall, though, and unlike the situation involving the EDL and Casuals United, these attempts have met, with one or two high-profile exceptions at clubs such as Chelsea, with little apparent success among fans of domestic club football (Lowles, 2009b; Frosdick and Marsh, 2005).

At national level there is some evidence of a different story, with England fans being involved in a number of violent incidents abroad that have been wholly or partially blamed on the malign influence of neo-fascist groups such as the NF, BNP and Combat 18. From the early 1980s, for example, when sections of the media commented that 'the NF seemed to be everywhere' at a Denmark versus England match in Copenhagen in 1982, through to disorder involving England fans



at major tournaments such as Italia '90, Euro '96 and France '98, the far-right has been implicated, at least to a degree, in the disturbances (Garland and Rowe, 2001).

During this period one issue around which Combat 18 has sought to mobilise football supporters and football hooligans is Ulster loyalism and hostility to Irish nationalism, vividly illustrated by clashes between England supporters and Irish fans which led to the curtailment of the Ireland versus England friendly match in Dublin in February 1995. Many media reports focused on the role that the BNP and Combat 18 had played in orchestrating the disturbances as a vehicle to air their opposition to Anglo-Irish efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement in Northern Ireland (Garland and Rowe, 2001). One factor which was widely cited as evidence of extreme right involvement in the disorders was the chanting of 'No surrender to the IRA', a common refrain of groups such as the BNP echoed in the 'No surrender to the Taliban' chants heard on EDL marches in 2009.

However, the centrality of C18 in organising the events at Lansdowne Road is often exaggerated, not least by C18 themselves, and it may well be the case that the English support that night was made up of a number of fans violently hostile to the Anglo-Irish agreement, and that C18 constituted just a small part of this crowd. Arguably, though, C18's links to domestic football hooliganism are more significant than its influence among England fans, as it has been alleged that C18 played a pivotal role in the outbreak of the racialised disorders in Oldham in May 2001, mentioned above. During the earlier part of that year the north-west town had been experiencing heightened tension between its local Asian and white communities. In an attempt to inflame this situation, Combat 18 attracted sympathisers from its national hooligan network to Oldham for the last match of the 2000/01 football season, including hundreds of Stoke City supporters, ostensibly to engage in disorder in Westwood, a part of the town with a large Asian presence (Lowles, 2009b). Three weeks later (and in an eerie precursor to the way that hooligan groups have more recently come together under the Casuals United banner), an alliance of Oldham Athletic, Stockport County, Shrewsbury Town and Huddersfield Town hooligans congregated in Oldham and engaged in violent confrontation with local Asians, precipitating widespread rioting. As Lowles (2001: xiv) argues, whatever the underlying social causes were for the disturbances, they had undoubtedly been triggered 'by the actions of C18 thugs and their football hooligan allies who ... had finally got what [they] wanted. Race war'.

Organisations such as the anti-fascist campaigning group *Searchlight* fear that one of the aims of the EDL's provocative demonstrations is to trigger something similar in the towns and cities it is targeting through an alliance of football hooligan crews, via Casuals United, that are sympathetic to its cause (Booth *et al.*, 2009). There certainly appears to be evidence that when the EDL does protest, it can do so by mobilising football hooligan crews with the objective of creating animosity between its supporters and young Asian (and especially Muslim) males. This often done in a manner that provokes the latter into retaliatory violence that unfortunately makes them seem as though they are not only the instigators of the disorder but that this disorder is racially motivated *on their part*. This was vividly illustrated by the events recounted, to one of the co-authors, by the landlady of a Birmingham bar (used by some EDL members before joining the protests), interviewed in the wake of the July violence:

*Co-author: 'So what happened earlier on here then?'*

*Licensee: 'Well this lad, he had just been for a quite drink, had about two pints on his own. As he left he was set upon by about ten Asian lads, they just kicked the hell out of him for no reason at all, he was just having a drink then going to meet his girlfriend - and he ends up going off in an ambulance. I didn't have any door staff on and so no-one helped him, he just got battered for no reason, well except for being white'*

*Co-author: So he wasn't EDL*

*Licensee: No, we had a few in here earlier on, but he was just a normal kid having a beer at the weekend [Research field notes – Birmingham protest 5/9/09]*

Much of the Birmingham disorder was instigated by the Casuals United element among the demonstrators, showing how successful elements of the far-right have been in mobilising disaffected football hooligans to its cause. As Lowles (2009a: 6) reports, the businessman bankrolling the EDL sees football fans as 'a potential source of support. They are a *hoi polloi* that gets off their backsides and travels to a city and they are available before and after matches'. The views of an EDL spokesperson would appear to concur, seeing football supporters as 'patriotic and they will stand their ground if it comes to it' (ibid: 6). It is this mixture of patriotism and fighting ability – 'standing their ground' if there is disorder – that is apparently so prized by the EDL. Its close relationship with Casuals United means that it already has a supply of 'footsoldiers' that it can draw upon from clubs as disparate as Luton Town, Aston Villa, Queens Park Rangers, Southampton, Bristol Rovers, West Bromwich Albion, Lincoln City and Wolverhampton Wanderers (Lowles, 2009a), raising the distinct

possibility that the events of 2001, that led to the outbreak of the Milltown disorders, could be repeated.

### **The Politics and Motivations of the EDL – Moving Beyond the Far Right Label?**

One of the distinctive and peculiar aspects of the EDL's politics is the group's emphasis upon anti-racism and its vocal opposition to the British National Party and Combat 18. Apparently in an effort both to distance itself from the BNP and other far-right groupings, and in an attempt to create a united 'front' with those from minority ethnic groupings that may oppose aspects of Islam, the EDL has displayed 'Black and White Unite' banners at many of its demonstrations and repeatedly stressed its opposition to racism, fascism and Nazism. The rather theatrical burning of a swastika flag at an EDL press conference in October 2009 was, in the eyes of those sympathisers present, proof of their anti-Nazi credentials (BBC, 2009b). The presence of several black and Asian EDL supporters at a demonstration in Leicester in 2010 was further evidence of this (fieldnotes, 9 October 2010), and at this rally, the EDL's leader stressed this point when he addressed the crowd:

We're not Nazis, we're not fascists – we will smash Nazis the same way we will smash militant Islam. We are exactly about black and white unite, every single community in this country can come and join our ranks, fill our ranks. We don't care if you arrived here yesterday; you're welcome to protect our Christian culture and our way of life. (Speech by Tommy Robinson, recorded by researcher, 9 October 2010).

It would seem much of the EDL's energy is devoted to accusing the media of lazy journalism and point-scoring by highlighting how as a group they contradict the typical and traditional racism of the far right. The anti-fascist organisation Searchlight, however, would contend this claim, and has repeatedly highlighted the links between the EDL and the BNP including a number of individuals, influential in the former, that are also members of, or have been involved with, the latter, including the EDL's leader himself (Woodson, 2009). The EDL has also championed women's and gay rights in an attempt to prove its democratic, non-extremist credentials while at the same time trying to show that Islam is a religion opposed to homosexuality and women's equality. Some of its supporters also apparently have a pro-Israeli stance, evidenced by the appearance of Star of David flags at some of their marches (witnessed by the authors at a number of demonstrations during fieldwork in 2009 and

2010). These viewpoints are at odds with many of those normally associated with far-right parties that have long championed the 'traditional' ideas of the family and of the role of women within it, whilst being vocal in their opposition to homosexuality. Anti-semitism has, of course, been a feature of many of these extremist groupings since the 1930s (Copsey, 2008).

However, whether these 'tolerant' facets of the EDL's thinking can be taken at face value is a moot point. It could well be the case that many of these more moderate aspects of their ideological framework are simply adopted in order to be seen to be in opposition to the tenets of what they believe constitute 'extremist Islam'. This may well explain the adoption of Star of David flags, which may in reality be deployed by EDL marchers in order to provoke a reaction from Muslim observers who object to Israeli policies in the Middle East. Similarly, the championing of the rights of women and gay and lesbian people may merely be an attempt to persuade the public (and media) that the EDL is, in fact, a moderate movement in the face of an intolerant religion (Islam) that grants little freedom to women or those of minority sexualities. The EDL may well be hoping that by embracing 'liberal' causes the media will cast them in a moderate light and, in turn, Islam in a bad, extremist one.

However, the true nature of the EDL's politics may have inadvertently been given away by Tommy Robinson in his speech at the Leicester demonstration in October 2010, cited above. His reference to 'our Christian culture' reveal that his view of English society and Englishness is narrow and exclusive of those of different cultures and religious backgrounds, or of those who do not conform to his vision of what constitutes 'our way of life'. In the same speech, he went on to say: 'We will combat militant Islam wherever it raises its ugly, paedophilic, disturbed, medieval fucking head', in a passage of speech that comes close to inciting religious hatred, as defined by the Racial and Religious Hatred Act, 2006. Certainly, if the leader of the EDL is stressing conformity to 'our culture' on the one hand, and condemning aspects of Islam in such brutal terms on the other, then he is undermining the organisation's own claims to moderation and tolerance of difference.

Moreover, the insignia and apparel adopted by the EDL and Casuals United may inadvertently give away important aspects of their ideologies. The EDL has been marketing a range of apparel (that displays its name and other insignia) through its website and the auction site eBay. These items heavily rely upon the Flag of Saint George. Clearly, for many in the EDL and Casuals United,

football, the St George's flag, and ideas of national identity and belonging, are inextricably interwoven, and the wide scale adoption of the St George's flag by these groups is perhaps in itself telling. Recent debates about the appropriateness of flying the St George's flag (such as those which inevitably occurred during the World Cup in Germany in 2006) have attempted to reposition the flag as a symbol of multi-ethnic Britain, whereas, previously and in contrast to this, the Union Jack was castigated for its association with colonialism and white racism (Gilroy, 2004). The obvious irony of course is that the St George's flag's older historical association with the Crusades, an earlier conflict between Christian Europe and Islam, means its adoption by the EDL is loaded with symbolism and meaning. In many ways, the very adoption of this flag as a symbol encompasses much of the message of these groups. It seems 'British Muslim' or 'English Muslim' are clearly regarded as unacceptable identities by many of the EDL's supporters, an assertion that is given further evidence by the types of discussions with white male EDL members witnessed by one of the authors when conducting covert ethnographic on EDL demonstrations:

*See that [points at St. George's flag flying above a church] that makes me proud, it's what being English is all about, but where I come from that isn't seen anymore. The Pakis have taken over the churches and turned them into mosques, now what the fuck is that about, eh? [sings] Give me bullets for my gun and I will shoot the Muzzie scum, No surrender to the Taliban.*

*I am sick of the lot of them [Muslims] and their demands, all take, take, take. They take the piss out of us, bringing in hundreds of them over through arranged marriages and that, looking after one another and fucking us over. It has to stop; this is England, not Afghanistan!*

*They can't live like us cos they are not evolved for it, they are simple, made for backward villages in the mountain where they can sit around eating stinking curries and raping chickens. They come over here and ruin England, I mean, would you want to live next to them? I don't, but they are taking over. That is why I want them gone.*

Although the EDL's organisers are at pains to distance themselves and the EDL from racist sentiments such as these, fieldwork suggests that this kind of racism and Islamophobia may well be more commonplace among the EDL's 'rank and file' than the group's leaders would publically admit. However, the EDL presents a more moderate, and much less overtly Islamophobic, public face by playing upon the present 'risky' status assigned to British (particularly Muslim) Asians in the popular

press over the course of the last decade. As Mythen and colleagues have noted, Islam has variously been portrayed in the mainstream press as:

... connected to the problems of violent crime, 'honour killings', drugs, illegal immigration and fraudulent welfare claims. This perceived 'riskiness' operates mundanely as a threat to the 'fabric' of predominantly white British culture through transgression of school dress codes or refusal to neglect traditional forms of worship, and profanely through religious extremism and radicalization. In media and political circles ... dominant discourses have invariably defined British Muslims *en bloc* as a risky, suspect population, raising the intensity of scrutiny on Muslims in general and potentially exacerbating the degree of public suspicion directed towards young male Muslims (Mythen, Walklate and Khan, 2009: 5).

In the eyes of many therefore, Islam has become anti-British, anti-modern, anti-liberal and dangerous (Williamson and Khiabany, 2010; Fakete, 2009). The twin elements identified by Law (2010) that are often conflated within the umbrella term 'Islamophobia' – anti-Islam sentiment and hostility directed at Muslims – have been adeptly exploited by the EDL. In particular, the organisation has been clever in the way that it has tapped into the frustrations of a disenfranchised section of the white working class whose grievances arise from a dense tapestry of social, economic and cultural conditions (and neglects), the consequences of which are still being played out – post 9/11 and 7/7 – as part of a global, national and local narrative with, as Mythen *et al.* mention above, an increasingly explicit tone of cultural, religious and racial hostility. There is also a sense within these communities that the main political parties have prioritised service provision towards minority ethnic residents, migrants and asylum seekers. This strong sense of injustice amongst some white communities, who feel that their own needs had been unfairly overlooked in favour of 'undeserving' minority ethnic, and especially Muslim, populations, and in such a climate the EDL's vocal opposition to 'extreme Islam' has been fused together with a determination to stand up for 'English culture'. Yet such sentiments are commonly encountered in the *Daily Mail*, *Sun* and *Daily Star* is not far removed from those shared by many in the groups (the EDL included) that the press roundly condemn and label 'far-right'.

Without wishing to simplify explanations for racial or religious hostility (see Gadd, 2009, for a neat summary of relevant debates), much of the EDL's support appears to stem from communities that are situated where a large Asian and Islamic population is found (for example, the likes of Birmingham and Luton). It is often in these areas where poor, socially excluded white communities

live in close proximity to large Asian populations where there can often be very little interaction between these groups, and where mutual suspicion and hostility can develop (McGhee, 2008). It is within such areas, where the tensions are stoked by agitation and aggression from the EDL, that the 'prospect of violence and communities tearing themselves apart is very real' (Lowles, 2009b: 7), yet it is also within these groups that the red top media tends to find its readership. Analysis of posts on EDL websites reveals that the opinions stated often chime with sentiments expressed on online comment pages linked to newspapers concerning stories about 'Islamic terrorism' or fundamentalist Islam.

### **Conclusion: How Dangerous is the EDL?**

This article has traced the rapid growth of a new 'street army' political phenomenon, the English Defence League, from its roots amongst a handful of people in Luton in the spring of 2009 to its current status as a grouping that can attract over a thousand people to its marches. The importance of an affiliated (and indeed overlapping) group, Casuals United, has also been acknowledged, particularly in relation to the capability of the EDL to mobilise large numbers of 'street fighters' to its demonstrations. The similarities to the way that, historically, the far-right has tried to attract football fans, and in particular hooligans, to its cause, was also noted in the way that the relationship between the EDL and Casuals United has developed.

The nature of the EDL's politics has also been discussed, and it has been suggested that much of this is flavoured by overt hostility towards Muslim communities that is partly borne out of a sense that such communities are unfairly being allocated resources at the expense of poor, white, working class populations. Indeed, the logic that underpins the EDL and Casual United's agenda is that the British government has engaged in the promotion and elevation of the interests of Islam against the white, Judeo-Christian traditions of liberty and equity they regard as 'English', including the differential treatment that, in their eyes, most (if not all) Muslims have been demanding (the recognition of Sharia being the most obvious). It is in the state's perceived appeasement of Muslim interest groups that their logic is formed, even if, in reality, the state's response to Muslim groups post-9/11 and 7/7 has in reality been marked by anything but appeasement (Chakraborti and Garland, 2009). For example, the

increased use of stop and search against young Asian men has produced tensions between them and the police in many cities with large Muslim populations (such as Birmingham, London and Manchester, see Liberty (2005)).

A fascinating aspect of the EDL's politics is its supposed opposition to the BNP, Combat 18 and other far-right extremist groups, even though it appears to share some of their ideas, members, street tactics and insignia. It claims not to be racist and to oppose only radical Islam, but this veneer of respectability is rather thin. Indeed, the researchers can attest to the fact that songs favoured by the EDL and Casuals United are frequently overtly hostile to Islam in general and *all* Muslims. In a Birmingham bar both during and after the EDL's protests on 5 September 2009, and in Leicester pubs and on the streets on 9 October 2010, for example, the authors heard EDL members singing 'You can shove your fucking Allah up your arse', 'Ten Muslim bombers', as well as the afore-mentioned 'No surrender to the Taliban' and 'Give me a gun and I will shoot the Muzzie scum'.

Interestingly, this is not the only way that the EDL seek to challenge some of the legitimacy of comparing them to traditional, neo-Nazi organisations. Clearly the organisation does have (albeit very limited) support from black, Asian and mixed-race members. Also the anti-Semitism previously associated with extremist groups is not evident, as the EDL have positioned themselves as pro-Israeli, pro-women's equality and also supportive of gay rights, although whether such enlightened attitudes exist among the organisation's rank and file is a moot point.

Nevertheless, Sibbitt's (1997) research into the influence of far-right groupings among urban, white working class communities suggests that while parties like the BNP may garner little electoral support from the residents of the housing estates she studied, what they did achieve was to channel the sense of grievance and anger that some white people felt about their own poor living standards towards local minority ethnic people:

In general, the young people were not members of these organisations. However, they were aware that the far-right presence and propaganda were threatening towards ethnic minorities. The young people therefore co-opted the language and insignia of these organisations into their own activities, such as graffiti or writing and posting threatening notes (Sibbitt, 1997: 38)



It seems as though this may be reflected in much of the EDL's popularity, as it offers the chance for disenfranchised communities to latch onto a cause that seems to embody a sense of national identity and belonging while simultaneously presenting a scapegoat for much of those communities' ills. It also has insignia that can be worn and chants that can be adopted and used in a threatening way towards those scapegoats – urban Muslim populations. If the EDL continues to grow at its present rate, and continues to provoke and to agitate, then it may well be that the racialised disturbances witnessed in 2001 will be repeated in the not too distant future.

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<sup>ii</sup> Domestic banning orders arose in their current form from the Football (Disorder) Act 2000 and are court orders which prohibit fans from attending matches for a specified period of time.