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# **ANTI-ISLAMIC PROTEST IN THE UK**

## **POLICY RESPONSES TO THE FAR RIGHT**

William Allchorn



# Anti-Islamic Protest in the UK

Demonstrations by far-right groups, such as the English Defence League, Britain First and PEGIDA, have caused considerable social and civic unrest in UK cities for nearly a decade. But how should policymakers respond to far-right and anti-Muslim activism? Drawing on extensive primary research with stakeholders, local authorities and policymakers, this book investigates the political, socio-economic and historic trends that fuel this form of political extremism across the UK. It also maps the different types of policy responses available to local politicians, police forces and behind-the-scenes policy officials involved in the day-to-day management of anti-Islamic street protest. The author demonstrates that it is only through developing successful countermeasures in the realm of politics, security and community-based politics that politicians, police and state actors will truly get to grips with this new far-right activism.

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## **Policy Responses to the Far Right**

**William Allchorn**

First published 2019  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
52 Vanderbilt Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data*  
A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN: 978-1-138-29963-4 (hbk)  
ISBN: 978-1-315-14377-4 (ebk)

Typeset in Times New Roman  
by Apex CoVantage, LLC

**To my wife, Lydia, and my family for their  
support along the way.**



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# Acknowledgements

I would like to thank here a number of people who have helped and supported me throughout the production of this book. First, I would like to thank my friends and family who have offered me a great deal of support over the past few years. In particular, I would like to thank my parents, sister and wife, who have supported me along my academic journey so far.

I would also like to thank the School of Politics and International Studies at the University of Leeds. I was enormously grateful to receive the POLIS Research Scholarship that helped fund the PhD phase of this research. I would also like to thank colleagues and members of staff who have provided new angles and perspectives on the topic of policy responses. In addition, I would also like to thank Dr Gordon Clubb, Professor Matthew Feldman, and Dr Mette Wiggen for offering the crucial feedback and advice on earlier versions of this book manuscript.

Third, I would like to thank all forty-eight local politicians and eleven behind-the-scenes policymakers who agreed to participate in the project. Their insights and accounts have helped deepen and expand the horizons of this book far beyond what I had originally imagined. I express the greatest of gratitude for their willingness to take time out of their busy schedules and for sharing with me their experiences of responding to anti-Islamic protest in the UK.

Finally, and by no means least, I would like to specifically thank my PhD supervisors, Dr Stuart McAnulla and Dr Richard Hayton, for their expert guidance, support and mentoring throughout a large chunk of research that came to form this book. Their comments, insights and willingness to look over earlier iterations of this book have played no small role in making it the sharp and coherent document you see before you. In addition, I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers for their feedback and suggestions that have greatly enhanced the scope and depth of this study, as well as Craig Fowlie and Rebecca McPhee for their expert editorial advice and direction.

# Abbreviations and acronyms

BNP	British National Party
BUF	British Union of Fascists
CCCPG	Community Cohesion Contingency Planning Group
CONTEST	UK Government's Counter-Terrorism Strategy
CSE	Child Sexual Exploitation
DCLG	Department of Communities and Local Government
EDL	English Defence League
ELM	East London Mosque
HMIC	Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabularies
LDDC	London Docklands Development Cooperation
MP	Member of Parliament
MEP	Member of European Parliament
NF	National Front
REP	Republikaner Party
SFC	Structured Focused Comparison
Tell MAMA	Tell Measuring Anti-Muslim Attacks
UAF	Unite Against Fascism
UPL	United People of Luton

# **Introduction**

## **Why policy responses to the EDL and Britain First?**

The role of Islam in the United Kingdom, and Western societies more generally, has become a hot topic over recent decades. Starting with the Salman Rushdie affair in the late 1980s through various measures imposed against jihadi terrorism and culminating in debates on its public expression, Islam and its adherents have been subject to significant antagonism in Western Europe and the United States (Saggar 2008). This antagonism is not at the margins of UK and European politics. One has only to look at the salience of Islam in the 2012 French presidential elections (Alexander 8th April 2012), recent debates about alleged introduction of so-called Islamism in UK schools (Wintour 18th July 2014) and the spectre of ISIS-inspired terror attacks across Europe in 2015, 2016 and 2017 in order to ascertain its mainstream importance.

The perceived ‘risky’ status of Islam and Muslim communities has been shown most actively amongst anti-Islamic<sup>1</sup> campaigners. Keen to shrug off reputations of anti-Semitism and classical forms of biological racism, one of the most prominent satellite issues that has come to form the focus of radical right-wing populist campaigns since the mid-2000s has been public expressions of Islam. As one key author on the European radical-right suggests, though ‘Islamophobia is certainly not an exclusive feature of the populist radical-right,’ such movements ‘tend to stand out in both the “quality” and quantity’ of their vehemence towards Islam, ‘which they describe as an inherently fundamentalist and imperialist religion-cum-ideology’ (Mudde 2007: 84).

In the UK context, the main harbinger of this more anti-Islamic form of politics has been the neo-fascist British National Party (BNP). Keen to modernise its ideology away from ethno-nationalism and towards a more populist (and therefore moderate) form of nationalism (Copsey 2007), it successfully fought local and European elections on a ticket of voluntary repatriation of ‘non-indigenous’ citizens (BNP 2005: 14) – winning over fifty Council seats, two places in the European Parliament and one Greater London Assembly seat in the process. Since the BNP’s implosion in 2010, however, the organised UK far right has experienced a process of fragmentation and re-orientation back towards a more direct action form of politics. As one recent report has noted, Britain’s far right is now more ‘isolated and in retreat’ than at any point over the past twenty years – ‘becoming more extreme and violent’ in the process (Hope not Hate 7th February 2016). This

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has had the effect, not just of moving the far right onto the UK's streets, but also transitioning the UK far right into the more pernicious (and criminal space) of online and offline anti-Muslim protests and attacks – accounting for two-fifths of all incidents from 2013 to 2014 (Feldman and Littler July 2014: 3).

This book examines responses to two of the most significant anti-Islam movements in Europe at the time of this transition, the English Defence League (EDL) and Britain First. Starting with the former, the EDL's emergence came in response to the picketing of a UK army regiment's homecoming parade in the South Bedfordshire town of Luton by the Islamist extremist organisation Al-Muhajiroun (Harrison 14th March 2009). Calling itself a 'human rights organisation,' the EDL aims to 'protect the inalienable rights of all people to protest against radical Islam's encroachment into the lives of non-Muslims' (EDL Website 2013). At its emergence in June 2009, the group mixed a unique blend of ultra-patriotism and anti-Muslim populist politics, with a potent harnessing of social media to recruit supporters and publicise its activities. Its *modus operandi* – and the focus of this book – has, however, been its offline activities: organising over fifty sizeable and disruptive protests in towns and cities across the UK in order to demonstrate against what it sees as the 'creeping' effects of 'Islamisation' within UK public life (Goodwin et al. 2016: 5).

Turning the latter, and drawing its lineage more directly from the BNP, Britain First is a slightly different 'beast' when compared with the EDL. Initially launched in May 2011 via the website, 'British Resistance' (The British Resistance 13th November 2011), Britain First started as a formally constituted far-right political party that combined the expertise of former BNP fundraiser Jim Dowson and former BNP Councillor Paul Golding. As one report by anti-fascist collective, Hope not Hate, suggests: 'Britain First . . . managed to escape the ghetto of race hate pages on social media by pressing and heavily pushing a message of moral outrage and panic into mainstream issues' (Hope not Hate June 2014: 16). Indeed, by June 2014, it was estimated that nearly 2.3 million Facebook users had interacted with materials published by Britain First – demonstrating a far more savvy use of social media than the EDL ever did (*ibid.*: 17). More recently, however, Britain First has moved its (largely successful) online form of activism into the offline space – by carrying out demonstrations, 'Christian Patrols' and 'Mosque Invasions' in a number of areas with large Muslim populations across the UK. Drawing on an 'increasingly confrontational and direct action approach' (Allen 2014: 360), however, Britain First distinguishes itself here from its predecessor, the EDL – both in the level of aggression it displays and in the religious fervour that is unique to its particular form of far-right activism – with Christianity playing 'a much more significant role' (*ibid.*); both in terms of the group's ideology and in its street patrols and protests.

Such visceral and disorderly forms of anti-Islamic protest have not gone unnoticed. Since 2010, there has been a burgeoning body of academic literature that has almost exclusively examined the rise and fall of the English Defence League. This has been debated: whether the origins and drivers of the English Defence League can be seen as far right, football hooliganism or an exclusively

working-class phenomenon (Copsey 2010; Garland and Treadwell 2010; Jackson 2011; Alessio and Meredith 2014), and whether the EDL's support base actually coheres with these popular stereotypes (Bartlett and Littler 2011; Goodwin 2013; Goodwin et al. 2016; Treadwell and Garland 2011). Moreover, EDL scholarship has tried to uncover the dynamics and extent of the group's commitment to 'anti-Islamism,' with some ascribing a deeper, 'Islamophobic' cause to the group's politics (Allen 2011; Busher 2014; Jackson 2011; Kassimeris and Jackson 2015; Pilkington 2016; Treadwell 2014). Furthermore, there have also been attempts to apply social movement theory to explain the group's specific form of grassroots organisation and its (limited) trajectory – with the group going into decline a mere two years into its existence (Jackson 2011; Busher 2013, 2015; Pilkington 2016).

As one prominent expert on anti-Muslim protest noted in 2014, however, we still know precious little about these groups and their 'possible impacts' (Busher 2014: 208). For example, few researchers have explored the effect the EDL and Britain First have had on community tensions, public-order, racially or religiously motivated hate crime, or the mobilisation of radical Islamist groups (*ibid.*: 1–2). Moreover, few scholars have examined the origins, ideology and modus operandi of Britain First (See Allen 2014; Hope not Hate June 2014; Brindle and MacMillan 2017 for exceptions). Looking again at consequences, another prominent area overlooked are how mainstream politicians have responded to anti-Islamic activism between 2009 and 2018. Only one chapter of a policy report by far-right expert Dr Nigel Copsey (2010), and one paragraph by the UK's leading scholar on Islamophobia, Dr Chris Allen (2014), have sought to shed light on how the UK government and national politicians have engaged with this new form of anti-Islamic protest. There has, however, been no thorough-going analysis of how the UK Politicians – alongside other policy practitioners – have responded to the EDL and Britain First mobilisations where the groups have manifested themselves the most: at the local level.

This omission is peculiar for several reasons. First, there has been a plethora of interventions by local authorities and mainstream political elites towards the EDL and Britain First. Most local authorities – in liaison with the police – helped manage these protests under the 1986 Public Order Act, and have therefore had to devise preparations and come up with informal policy solutions to mitigate the impacts of public disorder, community tensions and anti-Muslim attacks when these groups come to town. Moreover, the actions of these new insurgent groups have also animated Members of Parliament and local Councillors to offer their own denouncements, diagnoses and policy solutions. In particular, both MPs and Councillors regularly comment on anti-Islamic demonstrations amongst their constituencies and try to enact countermeasures to curb these groups – embarking on (sometimes extensive) local news, Parliamentary and collaborative local campaigns to obstruct the EDL and Britain First from protesting within their own particular locales. Politicians have therefore been at the forefront of responses to anti-Islamic protest in the UK.

Second, these interventions speak to a wider and more pertinent philosophical question about how policymakers 'tolerate the intolerant.' In particular, such a

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question has plagued the minds of liberal philosophers for centuries, with the likes of John Locke (1689), John Stuart Mill (1869), John Rawls (1971) and Michael Walzer (1997) all grappling with what Karl Popper once called the ‘paradox of tolerance’ – i.e. that ‘unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance’ (Popper 1945: 581). Whether (and why) local politicians have gone too far in censoring or restricting this form of far-right protest, therefore, is a weighty philosophical and moral question that can only be answered by looking at how particular local authorities and politicians have dealt with this new form of protest on a case-by-case basis.

Third, a burgeoning academic interest lies in examining both the nature and effectiveness of political responses to the contemporary far right in Europe. Though mainly focussed on party-political manifestations, some scholars at the *exclusivist* end of far-right responses suggest that a speedy and coherent ‘no-platform’ or ‘cordon sanitaire’ response by politicians helps collapse extreme right mobilisations (Art 2007), while some *inclusivists* suggest that mainstream elites should try to emulate far-right policies on multiculturalism and migration (Bale et al. 2010). Furthermore, some advocate less political and more sociologically informed responses – positing that, in order to reduce racial and religious prejudice, politicians should be tackling the problem of right-wing extremism at a mass level by, for example, promoting social interaction between ethnic minorities and other resident populations as well as stimulating greater engagement between politicians and voters (Goodwin 2011). Such typologies, however, have yet to be applied to anti-Islamic activism in the UK – omitting a systematic overview of strategies and tactics available to policymakers when dealing with these problematic groups.

More specifically, this delay also prevents the collation and distribution of lessons and best practice that could be used for other, related forms of anti-Islamic protest that have grown up in recent years; both as a result of the continuing splintering and fragmentation of the BNP and EDL in the UK but also as a result of the growth of broader ‘counter-jihad’ movement internationally. Whether it be PEGIDA in Germany, the Bloc against Islam in the Czech Republic or Identitarian movements in Austria and France, similar questions surrounding public-order, community cohesion and counter-extremism policy will be raising their heads there. The UK case therefore speaks to a broader environment of anti-Islamic street activism that we have seen grow up in the past five years, in Europe but also in North America and Australasia.

#### Aims of the book

In order to address this ‘response’ lacuna then, this book seeks to examine: how have UK policy practitioners responded to the English Defence League and Britain First over the past nine years? This main research question will be answered through over 60 semi-structured elite interviews conducted by the author with senior police officers, Members of Parliament, local Councillors and behind-the-scenes officials who have experienced sizeable and/or frequent anti-Islamic

protest, from 2009 to 2017. More specifically, we will focus on policy responses in Birmingham, Bradford, Leicester, Luton and Tower Hamlets – all places with storied histories of far-right mobilisations. These empirical case studies will form the backbone of the book and will for the first time provide some answers as to what underlying factors have helped stymie or stimulate successful interventions towards anti-Islamic protest. Moreover, they will also provide the basis for the first rigorous and sustained scholarly analysis of EDL and Britain First demonstrations – illuminating the drivers and determinants of the groups' main forms of anti-Islamic activism.

Moving on to more theoretical concerns, the ontological and epistemological positions that underpin this book are very specific. In terms of the former, the ontology of the research is linked to foundationalism. This is based on the belief that there is a world out there to be discovered, but that 'the real world effect on actions is mediated by ideas' (Furlong and Marsh 2010: 190). Moreover, in terms of the epistemological approach taken, a realist interpretation of events is used. In the case of political responses, for example, local politicians' understanding of anti-Islam protest groups, their political belief systems and understanding of their role are crucial in understanding how they respond to and manage the group. Moreover, and as shown in Figure 1.1, the local political and social context as well as politician's life experiences temper this more ideational field of understanding – determining the types of responses, how they are arrived at and what elites deem to be 'possible' when managing anti-Islamic protests.

What will be found in the course of this study, therefore, is that while the default response of local mainstream political elites has been to exclude both of these groups, there have also been more limited cases of inclusion – with policy-makers sustainably engaging with both communities affected by and communities prone to support anti-Islamic activism. It will be argued that a renewed emphasis needs to be placed on this more local-level engagement and interaction in order to responsibly deal with and prevent the threat posed by the EDL and Britain First, as well as other far-right groups, in the years and decades to come. Only by tackling the populist and prejudicial drivers of such groups can we ameliorate their potentially divisive and corrosive impact on UK politics and society.

## Outline of the book

Before detailing this book's findings and discussing their implications, we will spend the next chapter placing this current wave of anti-Islamic protest in international, historical and contemporary context. The purpose of Chapter 1 will therefore be to examine how the current epoch fits within the history of the UK far right, as well as a broader shift in the European far right towards anti-Islamic campaigns. Chapter 2 will then move on to detail the book's typology and what specific policy countermeasures can be brought against anti-Islamic groups. The main purpose of this chapter is to familiarise the reader with the burgeoning literature on responses to the far right in Europe more generally as well as responses to the EDL and Britain First more specifically. Following this discussion of typology,



*Figure 1.1* Causal model of politicians' responses

Source: Based on the typology used in Goldstein and Keohane (1993: 8–11).

we will move on to look at the book's main findings. The main part of this book looks at five UK locations where the EDL and Britain First have demonstrated the most and in sizeable numbers: Birmingham, Bradford, Leicester, Luton and Tower Hamlets. Each chapter deals with a separate case study and will, first, detail the background of each urban location before examining the strategies used by elites when anti-Islamic protest has come to town. What will be found in the main bodies of these chapters is that, while a tiny minority of local authorities have been arguably 'ready' to deal with these protests, the majority of local authorities have been on sizeable organisational learning processes in order to adapt, address and calibrate their responses to this new form of anti-Islamic protest. This has seen mixed results that have ranged from political schism to significant success in curbing this new far-right 'threat.'

Last but not least, the book will conclude by evaluating the nature and effectiveness of these responses. It will be argued here that a shift from exclusion towards more dynamic forms of inclusion are needed in order to address the EDL, Britain First and other UK anti-Islam groups that have become a lightning rod for white working-class disaffection over recent years. Moreover, and specifically in relation to the public-order aspects of managing anti-Islamic protests, it will be suggested that a more low-key, consensual style of policing and a less confrontational style of anti-fascist activism is needed in order to help ameliorate the potentially disorderly effects of such demonstrations. Before we come to this, however, we first need to establish how the EDL and Britain First fit into the UK's broader history of far-right activism, as well as the broader context of anti-Islamic protest. It is to this task that the first chapter will now turn.

## Note

1 Here, 'anti-Islamic' is used to describe the English Defence League and Britain First's particular form of protest. This is a slightly altered version of Pilkington's (2016) 'anti-Islamist' characterisation of the EDL and aims at the groups' main area of grievance: not just radical Islam or 'Islamism,' but the beliefs, tenets and theology of Islam itself.

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# 1 Context

## The rise of anti-Islamic protest and the evolution of the UK Far Right

### Introduction

Post-Brexit, the UK far right suddenly launched itself back into media attention and newspaper headlines. Following the murder of Batley and Spen MP Jo Cox, there was a renewed crackdown on this particular form of extremism – starting with a court injunction against Britain First (York 15th August 2016) and culminating in the proscription of National Action in December 2016 (BBC News 12th December 2016). Related to this, there was also a spike in xenophobic attacks and hate crime – seeing a 41% increase in the immediate aftermath of Britain voting to leave the European Union (BBC News 15th February 2017). Many people would expect such an environment to be fortuitous for such a fringe political movement.

As we explore in this chapter of the book, however, the UK far right has been continuing to struggle to find relevance ever since the implosion of the neo-fascist British National Party at the 2010 General Election. In what follows we, first, sketch the emergence and development of the UK historic far right. Second, we bring this analysis up-to-date – outlining how the UK far right has morphed and changed more recently. What will be argued is that, since the BNP's implosion in 2010, the organised UK far right has experienced a process of fragmentation and re-orientation back towards a more direct action, 'vigilante-style' form of politics. This has seen the UK far-right shift into a more criminal and crowded marketplace of methods and ideas. First, however, we will sketch the all-important international context that has informed the rise of anti-Islamic protest in the UK – looking at the transnational movements that have helped to grow such activism over the past two decades.

### **The rise of anti-Islamic protest: 'counter-jihad' and transnational far-right activism**

The origins of contemporary anti-Islamic activism on the far right started in the 1980s but gained substantial momentum after the 11th September 2001 terror attacks in the United States. Starting on the internet but then quickly transitioning itself into party-political election campaigns, the Twin Tower attacks gave momentum to Huntington's 'Clash of Civilisations' thesis and the notion of a

Christianised Western culture being under attack from the barbarians at the gate (i.e. the Muslim community), post-9/11. As José Zúquete (2008: 322) points out, switching from anti-Semitism, Islam has become the ‘new enemy’ of the far right as well as a key object of popular racist sentiment from the so-called liberal centre.

One notable feature of recent far-right campaigns over the last two decades has therefore been the frequency of their anti-Islamic tenor. Looking back as far as 2001, for example, the BNP’s former chairman, Nick Griffin, started his own ‘Campaign Against Islam’ in September 2001 that aimed to normalise Islam as a supposedly ‘evil and wicked faith’ (Copsey 2008: 166). Moreover, in 2006, Filip Dewinter, former leader of the Flemish Vlaams Belang, doubled his party’s council representation by turning away from anti-Semitism and towards anti-Muslim stance (Betz 2008: 105). A month later, Geert Wilders’ Dutch Party for Freedom scored a Parliamentary breakthrough on a ‘largely nativist platform designed to stop the Tsunami of Islamisation’ (*ibid.*: 111). Finally, in November 2009, the Swiss People’s Party campaigned successfully for a ban on minarets, suggesting that Islam had an overriding political identity that made it unconstitutional (*ibid.*: 113).

As well as becoming more frequent, anti-Islamic campaigns by the European far right have also become more co-ordinated and transnational. In early 2009, for example, a group of leading extreme right politicians met ‘to devise strategies to impede . . . the advance of Islam in Europe’ (Betz 2013: 74) as part of the ‘Cities against Islamization’ initiative. This provided not only a basis of contact between leading anti-Islamic politicians, but also the space to develop an ‘ideological foundation and justification’ for campaigns against symbols and aspects of Islam’s alleged encroachment into Western Europe’s liberal democratic societies (*ibid.*: 75). Indeed, it pioneered the approach of looking upon the building of mosques as a form of conquest and the idea that Islam is a political ideology whose adherents are inherently anti-integrationist (*ibid.*). Moreover, and as demonstrated by the successful formation of far-right European Parliamentary grouping ‘Europe of Nations and Freedom’ in June 2015, it served as a platform for the diffusion of other non-Islamic campaigning norms, ideas and campaign tactics that can be diffused between nations.

Not all prominent extreme right parties have been so quick to adopt an anti-Islamic stance, however. Until Marine Le Pen became leader in January 2011, the Front National (FN) in France stayed in an ambiguous position towards the Islamic question (*ibid.*: 76). This was because Jean-Marie Le Pen saw Islam as a distraction from the main issue that she wished her party to continue campaigning on: immigration. Moreover, the creation of an FN splinter faction, the Mouvement National Republicain, in 1999 absorbed more hard-line racialists with anti-Islamic views (Betz 2008: 115). Finally, France’s historical ties to North Africa and the case of former Algerian nationals who had fought for France gave Islam a special semi-protected status within the party (*ibid.*). This has, however, obviously shifted more recently – with current leader Le Pen likening Muslims praying in the street to the Nazi occupation (Sims 15th December 2015) and highlighting Muslim immigration as a ‘grave threat’ to France during the 2012 Presidential Elections (Al Jazeera 17th December 2012).

The coherence of messages the contemporary extreme right parties use against Islam and Muslim minorities is such that we can already talk of four predominant discourses on the subject. These are echoed in discourse, tactics and narratives of the EDL and Britain First. The first is the growing relevance of Christian narratives and motifs, with a particular ‘emphasis on “Christian identity” of “original communities,” who are now [viewed as] endangered by the advance of Islam across Europe’ (Zùqueté 2008: 326). The second is a ‘discursive shift in many of these [extreme right parties] to a decidedly pro-Jewish direction.’ For example, Vlaams Belang’s Filip Dewinter describes Judaism as a ‘natural ally’ in Europe and Israel as ‘the only nation with freedom of speech, freedom of religion and rule of law’ in the Middle East (*ibid.*: 328). The third are ‘post-nationalist dynamics and arguments’ that suggest that all Europeans are gradually being subordinated by the encroachment of Islamic governance (*ibid.*: 331). The final discursive device is to use positions considered to be ‘exclusive to progressive and feminist groups in the West.’ For example, that head scarves are a form of female oppression or that halal is a form of animal cruelty (*ibid.*: 332).

In recent years, the move towards anti-Islamic politics by extreme right parties has also been accompanied by the growth of more shadowy and informal transnational network of actors, the so-called counter-jihad movement. The sole purpose of this new ‘pan-European far right movement’ is not to win elections but to ‘combat the perceived threat of “Islamization” through European-wide protests’ as well as ‘awareness and advocacy campaigns’ (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Brun 2013: 1). Like the party-political manifestation of anti-Islam campaigns, it is ‘vehemently against anti-Semitism’ and (at least strategically) holds a ‘liberal [and progressive] position’ on various social and political issues in order to construct a supposedly unenlightened and regressive Muslim ‘Other’ (Archer 2013: 181).

Scholars posit that this new, social movement turn in far-right anti-Islamic politics started in 2007 at conferences by activists and bloggers in Copenhagen and Brussels (Archer 2013: 180; Meleagrou-Hitchens and Brun 2013: 18; Mulhall 2016), with greater formalisation occurring in 2012. Key themes identified within its rhetoric include that belief that ‘strict sharia imposed in countries such as Saudi Arabia, or by extremist groups like the Taliban in Afghanistan. . . , is integral to Islam’ (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Brun 2013: 42). It also asserts that Islam is an aggressive and un-reformed religion – with the logical outcome of Muslim immigration being imminent civil war (*ibid.*: 43).

The movement has been divided between more populist and radical elements (Berntzen and Sandberg 2014: 4). The former encompasses the blogs of Pamela Geller and Robert Spencer, *Atlas Shrugs* and *Jihad Watch*, rhetoric of populist radical-right parties and ‘counter-jihad’ umbrella groups such as Stop Islamisation of Europe and America. They emphasise the ‘dichotomy of the people versus the Elite, and warn . . . against the “Islamization” of society’ (*ibid.*). The latter encompasses the various other European ‘defence leagues’ (such as the Norwegian, Danish and Finnish Defence Leagues) and anti-Islamic social movements (such as the Soldiers of Odin and PEGIDA) that adopt more direct action tactics, include groups with more overt support for violent measures, and subscribe to some of the

wilder conspiracy theories (proposed by blogger Fjordman and writer Bat Ye'or), which suggest that 'political and cultural elites have entered into a secret partnership with the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamists' (*ibid.*).

Though nebulous, the significance of this new transnational far-right movement cannot be underestimated. It has provided the inspiration for both one of the most horrific terrorist attacks in recent years and other forms of anti-Islamic protest across the European continent. It was this extremist milieu that provided an important influence on Anders Behring Breivik, a Norwegian lone-wolf terrorist who killed 77 people in a murderous rampage on 22nd July 2011 (Goodwin et al. 2016: 5). His 1,518-page manifesto, *2083: A European Declaration of Independence*, contains partial reproductions of materials found on self-styled 'counter-jihadist' blogs such as the 'Gates of Vienna,' named after the Siege of Vienna by the Ottoman Empire in 1529 (Berntzen and Sandberg 2014: 14). Moreover, the rhetoric contained within original sections of Breivik's manifesto are remarkably similar to more radical sections of the 'counter-jihad' movement online (*ibid.*: 10).

Finally, and most importantly, it was in this online environment that the EDL and later Britain First came about. Paul Ray, a BNP supporter and native of Luton, 'began blogging in 2007 with a strong anti-Islam focus that was inspired by the growing Counter-Jihad movement in the United States' (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Brun 2013: 9). He went on to be a formative member of the EDL in 2009 and founded some of the key themes of the group, including the idea of a pan-Islamic war against the West, Islamisation, state and media complicity in the influence of Islam, and the problematic role of Muslim migrants in British society (*ibid.*: 10). Moreover, Britain First has picked up and perpetuated the more 'Christian' elements of the European 'counter-jihad' movement – performing 'Christian Patrols,' giving Bibles out in mosques and provocatively asking Muslims to 'turn away from the false prophet [i.e. Mohammed] and embrace the saviour Jesus Christ' (York 2nd March 2016). As we will now see, this has also been part of a new turn in UK far-right activism.

### **From ugly duckling to mainstream threat: focussing in on Britain's historical far right**

Every year, the anti-fascist organisation Hope not Hate publishes what it calls a 'State of Hate' report. Contained within it is a snapshot of how the UK far right has fared in the previous year. Fortunately for us, this usually contains a review of the parlous state of affairs within this fringe political movement. Another splintering, fragmentation or falling out, for example, it sets out to highlight the successes and failures of the movement and any exceptional developments that have happened – based on the monitoring work of one the UK's leading anti-fascist groups.

Hope not Hate's 2015 report was, however, exceptionally glum in its interpretation of where the UK far right is headed. '[P]olitically marginalised, fractured, leaderless and increasingly violent,' the report suggested, Britain's far right is now more 'isolated and in retreat' than at any point over the past twenty years – 'becoming more extreme and violent' in the process (Hope not Hate 7th February 2016).

This has had the effect, not just of moving the far right onto the UK's streets, but also transitioning the UK far right into the more pernicious (and criminal space) of online and offline anti-Muslim protests and attacks – accounting for two-fifths of all incidents in the year 2013–2014 (Feldman and Littler July 2014: 3). To discount the UK far right, therefore, would be to miss out on some clearly key trends bubbling under the surface of this particular form of extremist politics and echoes the mood of the 1990s scholarship on these types of groups, which suggested that Britain was somehow ‘exceptional’ in resisting the throes of right-wing extremism.

Before the electoral rise of the BNP in the early-mid 2000s, one key trope within the UK literature on the far right was its abject failure to make any appreciable impact on UK electoral politics. In his 1996 chapter in a co-edited book about the ‘Failure of British Fascism,’ for example, political historian Roger Griffin likened the UK far right to an ‘ugly duckling’ when compared to some of its continental cousins. Limited by a political cultural consensus in the UK around ‘moderation, a hatred of fanaticism, an aversion to demagogic, uniforms and overt racism’ (Goodwin 2007: 242), this particular political movement has been left to ‘scratch around indefinitely without ever coming out as a swan’ (Griffin 1996: 163).

The first major manifestation of the UK far right was Oswald Mosley’s British Union of Fascists (BUF) in the 1930s. Led by a former Labour Minister and given support by the (then) owner of the *Daily Mail*, Lord Rothermere, the BUF believed in anti-communism and protectionism as well as replacing the Parliamentary democracy with a strong state and leader reminiscent of Mussolini’s Italy. Mosley’s Blackshirts had around 50,000 members at their peak in 1934, but establishment support swiftly declined after a rally in Olympia in the same year that saw anti-fascists ‘forcefully ejected’ (Copsey 2000: 16). The BUF was mainly a protest-based movement, however, and with the onset of World War II was eventually proscribed in 1940.

The next major manifestation of far-right extremism in the UK was the Union Movement (UM). Again, another brainchild of Oswald Mosley after his detainment and eight-year exile from party politics in 1948, its ideology only slightly diverged from its predecessor, the BUF. Taking Mosley’s 1947 text *The Alternative* as its guide, the party argued for closer integration between European nations as a counterbalance to Americanism on the one hand and Bolshevism on the other (Poole 1996: 69). Underlying this more mainstream façade was, however, a more radical critique of liberal democracy and its replacement with a strong executive and government by referenda. Due to the fragmented nature of the far right at the time and the strong effect of World War II, the UM did not gain much traction; membership peaked at 1,500 members and Mosley only secured 8.1% of vote when contesting the Parliamentary seat of Kensington North in 1959 – a result described by one historian as an ‘abject failure’ (*ibid.* : 64).

Subsequent to the decline of the Union Movement, the British far-right scene entered into somewhat of a hinterland until the creation of the National Front in 1967. For example, in 1954, A.K. Chesterton, who had been the leading intellectual

force behind the BUF, formed the League of Empire Loyalists (LEL). As its name suggests, the LEL chose to oppose the dissolution of the British Empire that it saw as tantamount to treason (Thurlow 1998: 221). In a more sinister vein, however, the group also viewed Bolshevism and capitalism as part of Jewish-led conspiracy by the establishment. Symptomatic of the fragmented nature of the UK far right at the time, however, the LEL was a largely minor and ineffectual political outfit that had ‘little impact on the electorate’ (*ibid.*). Despite performing a series of high-level publicity stunts between 1955 and 1961, the party only secured 1,064 votes at 1964 General Election. Shortly after, it ran into financial difficulties and collapsed.

Not perturbed by this period of abject failure, A.K. Chesterton went on to help unify the UK far right under the banner of the National Front. Set up to oppose immigration and multiculturalist policies of the first Wilson government (1964–1970), it received spikes in electoral support in 1972 and 1976 when Ugandan and Malawian Asians fled to the UK. Moreover, it polled strongly up to (and including) the 1979 Parliamentary election – with 191,000 votes and some local seats secured at its ascendancy. Its march was, however, largely abated by the populist nationalism of mainstream elites (e.g. Powell and Thatcher) as well as apparent successes by the anti-fascist Anti-Nazi League in branding the organisation as a ‘Nazi front.’ For example, in 1978, then leader of the Conservative Party, Margaret Thatcher, talked about Britain being ‘swamped by alien cultures’ and hardened its stance on ‘law-and-order’ (Eatwell 2003: 340). Such comments and active opposition, however, worked; the National Front splintered and entered into serious infighting that would plague the far-right scene until the early 1990s (Eatwell 1998).

The most successful historic far-right movement in the UK of recent times, however, was the neo-fascist British National Party (BNP). Set up by former National Front chairman John Tyndall in 1982, the BNP did not win its first electoral contest until 1993 – almost ten years after its foundation. This was mainly because of its lack of legitimacy and its tarring with the fascist brush that was not helped by its image as a ‘feet on the street’ operation. Moreover, it was also symptomatic of Tyndall’s lack of electoral appetite and obsession with far-right esoterica (Copsey 2008). Such reluctance did not, however, stop the party’s breakthrough at a local by-election in Tower Hamlets in 1993. This episode would pilot a successful form of community-based activism that would become the core of a much-needed modernisation of the party later in the decade (Goodwin 2011).

In the 1990s, however, a group of modernisers – that would later involve the BNP’s future chairman, Nick Griffin – aimed to lift the party out of obscurity (Copsey 2008: 70). Going through a period of ideological moderation and professionalisation from 1999 onwards, the BNP under Griffin managed to rack up a number of successful local election victories throughout the early to mid-2000s in post-industrial Northern towns (Goodwin 2011: 66–71, 88–90). General Election support took off to such an extent that in 2010, it won nearly 600,000 votes (*ibid.*: 10). Moreover, at its peak in 2009, the BNP elected its first two representatives at national elections and could claim the most Councillors of any far-right party in

British political history (*ibid.*: 1). Until its implosion after the 2010 General Election, then, it was widely seen as one of the most successful far-right forces in UK politics (*ibid.*: xiii).

### **From electoralism (back) to street-based politics: Britain's contemporary far right**

The 2010 General Election would, however, prove to be the zenith for this more electoral form of activism. Afterwards, the main actor on this part of the far-right scene would be embroiled in bitter infighting over the divisive figure of Nick Griffin as well as the parlous state of party finances. Already brewing, however, was a mode of activism that would come to define the current epoch of far-right activity in the UK: street-based politics. This was signalled by the advent of the English Defence League in 2009, but also with the foundation of Britain First two years later. Moreover, a number of splinter groups or 'defence leagues' (the North West, the North East Infidels, PEGIDA UK and the South East Alliance) cleaved off the main far-right vehicle of the EDL and also came into prominence at this time – all with the express intent of protesting against the 'Islamification' of the UK public sphere. It is here that we can highlight three key developments that have occurred during this period of anti-Islamic protest.

#### **(a) *A transition within the contemporary UK far right towards the more criminal space of anti-Islamic protest attacks (both online and offline)***

The first notable trend of the contemporary UK far right has been a noticeable transition towards the more criminal space of anti-Islamic protest and attacks (both online and offline) in the last nine years. As noted in the introduction and recorded by the anti-Muslim hate crime monitoring service Tell MAMA, two-fifths of all incidents in the year 2013–2014 were committed by far-right activists (Feldman and Littler July 2014: 3). Coming after the murder of Fusilier Lee Rigby during a terror attack on Woolwich's Royal Artillery barracks in London on 22nd May 2013 researchers found that there was an appreciable 'uptick' in online and offline anti-Muslim hate crime after the attack in May of 2013 – suggesting a wider pool of violent and non-violent activity by those who may not necessarily be affiliated to any anti-Islamic far-right groups but who may sympathise with their activities.

In addition, the shift by the contemporary UK far right from electoral politics to a more street-based form of activism has seen the UK's Muslim community on the receiving end of some pretty nasty attacks by far-right protestors. At the first EDL demonstration in Leicester in October 2010, for example, far-right activists managed to break police lines and attack a burger bar where Muslim residents were trapped inside (Standpoint 16th October 2010). Furthermore, a number of individuals inspired by the current wave of anti-Islamic far-right groups have either planned or went on to commit solo actor forms of terrorism. In April 2013, for

example, a 25-year-old Ukrainian national, Pavlo Lapshyn, killed an 82-year-old Muslim man and planted bombs at three mosques in Birmingham (BBC News 25th October 2013). A year later, an EDL-inspired Leicestershire teenager, Michael Pigglin, was detained indefinitely for plotting to conduct a Columbine-style attack on his former secondary school (BBC News 8th April 2016). Finally, Zack Davies of the neo-Nazi group ‘National Action’ was convicted of attempted murder after attacking a Sikh doctor with a claw hammer and a machete in June 2015 (Whelan 25th June 2015).

**(b) An increasingly competitive ‘marketplace’ of competing movements and ideas**

The second notable trend of the contemporary UK far right has been an increasingly competitive and crowded ‘marketplace’ of competing movements and ideas (Macklin 10th April 2016). Stripped of the structures of formal membership in one particular party, a panoply of organisations and sub-groups of those organisations have sprouted forth – making the far right organisationally fragmented and weak. At this moment in time, there are four main actors on the UK far-right scene – with three key splinter groups. These range from groups with a more ‘moderate’ anti-Islam agenda to the more extreme neo-Nazi groups.

In terms of the main actors on the far right of UK politics, we have the National Front, English Defence League, Britain First and National Action. The neo-fascist National Front has about 400 members and occasionally puts on demonstrations. The English Defence League and Britain First both came to prominence because of their direct action ‘march and grow’ style of politics, but have been more of a public-order problem rather than a serious contender in electoral contests. The latter also suffered from being tarred with the brush of the BNP, with overlaps in personnel and anti-Muslim prejudice. The most worrying movement is National Action – a small group of hard-line National Socialists who came to the fore in 2014 by trolling Jewish Labour MP Lucian Berger. They were proscribed in December 2016 under terror legislation usually used for extreme Islamist and Irish Nationalist groups, due to concerns over safety and security (Elgot 12th December 2016).

Followed by these more key actors, there are also the English Defence League splinter groups. In April 2012, for example, a leading activist within the EDL, John ‘Snowy’ Shaw, was ejected from the group after a dispute over finances. This in turn led to the splintering and fragmentation of the EDL – with Shaw setting up the more ideologically radical and ‘neo-Nazi’ North East Infidels. Moreover, and according to the anti-fascist organisation *Hope not Hate*, its partner organisation the North West Infidels (NWI) is the most active of the EDL splinter groups (Hope not Hate 7th February 2016). With about 40–45 activists in total, NWI was able to organise twelve demonstrations in 2015 (*ibid.*). Third, Tommy Robinson’s October 2013 departure from the EDL saw him go onto to set up PEGIDA UK (translated from German as ‘Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West’) in January 2016 – a reboot of a previously failed attempt to establish a UK

chapter of the then pan-European movement (Dearden 4th April 2015), which also failed to gain traction (Allchorn 15th January 2016). Finally, the third key EDL splinter group is the South East Alliance. Headed by former EDL organiser Paul Prodromou, it has failed to attract any major support beyond a small and disgruntled group of ex-EDL activists. What unites these splinter groups are their more radical adherence to anti-Islamic and (for some) anti-Semitic forms of biological racism.

**(c) *A move towards the ever-increasing use of direct action  
'vigilante-style' politics as a source of political mobilisation***

The third notable trend of the contemporary UK far right has been a move towards an ever-increasing use of direct action ‘vigilante-style’ politics as a source of political mobilisation. A case in point here is Britain First. Drawing its lineage more directly from the BNP, Britain First has moved its (largely successful) online form of activism into the offline space – carrying out demonstrations, ‘Christian Patrols’ and ‘Mosque Invasions’ in a number of areas with large Muslim populations across the UK. Drawing on an ‘increasingly confrontational and direct action approach’ with Christianity playing ‘a much more significant role’ (Allen 2014: 360), however, Britain First distinguishes itself from its EDL predecessor – both in the level of aggression it displays, but also the religious fervour that is unique to its particular form of far-right activism.

This more aggressive form of direct action is worrying for two reasons. The first is that such attacks undermine efforts to foster community cohesion in such areas where social polarisation is a problem. For example, Britain First’s main focus has been on Birmingham, Bradford, Luton and Tower Hamlets – all areas with a significant Muslim populations. The second is the threat such attacks pose to public safety. For example, when Britain First appeared on the doorstep of Bradford’s mayor, Khadim Hussain, in May 2014, this directly endangered the lives of his family (Pidd and Lloyd 13th May 2014). Moreover, when the group performed a ‘Mosque Invasion’ in the Bury Park area of Luton a month later, this was clearly to provoke local Muslims into responding with violence (Tell MAMA 16th June 2014). The police have recognised this – placing a nationwide injunction on the group from going near any Muslim place of worship and arresting the leader of the group, Paul Golding, for breaching this ban at the end of 2016 (Pasha-Robinson 15th December 2016).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, then, two major points emerge from this chapter. The first is that, while Britain’s historical far right moved from ‘march and grow’ to electoralism, Britain’s contemporary far right has reversed this trend: moving from electoralism (back) to a more aggressive street-based form of anti-Islamic politics. This has echoed more recent trends within the European far right – seeing the rise of both party-political and street-based forms of anti-Islamic activism; the latter more

closely associated with a global ‘counter-jihad’ movement. In the UK, both the English Defence League and its successor organisation, Britain First, have been the most sustained movements symptomatic of this shift – and is why they have been selected as the focus for this study. This move back to a more street-based form of anti-Islamic activism has, however, lead to three overlapping and concerning trends: the first is a shift to the more criminal space of anti-Islamic protest and attacks (both online and offline); the second is an increasingly competitive ‘marketplace’ of competing movements and ideas; the third is a move towards the ever-increasing use of direct action politics as a source of political mobilisation. As we will see from the following case studies, this has posed a key public policy challenge for political elites in the UK over the past decade.

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## 2 What policy responses?

### UK national policy responses and localised countermeasures to Anti-Islamic protest

#### Introduction

Compared to academic studies substantively looking at the EDL and Britain First, there are relatively few academic texts devoted entirely to looking at responses to anti-Islamic protest. This is regrettable, as the clearly disruptive nature of these groups (and their dynamic of provocation) suggests that an examination of responses – particularly by politicians, the police and other policy practitioners – is long overdue. More specifically, the delay in examining the public-order management of actions by the EDL and Britain First – as well as the intersecting policy areas of community cohesion and counter-extremism more broadly – prevents the collation and distribution of lessons and best practice that could be used for other, related forms of anti-Islamic protest that have grown up in recent years; both as a result of the continuing splintering and fragmentation of the BNP and EDL in the UK, and as a result of the growth of broader ‘counter-jihad’ movement internationally. This chapter will first provide an overview of UK policy responses towards anti-Islamic protest groups before outlining the ‘policy response’ lacuna in the current academic literature on the EDL and Britain First. Finally, a new typology of UK responses will be put forward before contextualising this within European responses.

#### ‘Clean-hands’ beyond the BNP? National responses to the English Defence League and Britain First

##### *(a) Introduction*

In his book on political extremism in Europe, William M. Downs (2012) suggests that the approach taken by Britain towards the contemporary far right is one of ‘clean hands,’ or ‘ignoring the [far-right] threat,’ such that the ‘offending party cannot capture the attention they crave’ (p. 32). He quotes former Home Office Minister Andy Burnham suggesting that the EDL and Britain First’s predecessor, the BNP, posed ‘a very localised threat and I am worried that if we give them too much coverage, it can back up the notion that they are a potent protest vote.’ In contrast, Downs also quotes former Scottish First Minister Jack McConnell, who warned that: ‘these people are at their most dangerous if we ignore them’ (p. 33).

In some ways, these statements capture the central difficulty of a ‘clean-hands’ response, trying on the one hand to keep responses low-key, but also trying to – or at least be seen to be trying to – condemn the actions and values of such groups. As we will see, such a low-key tactic has also been used by the UK government and national-level political elites towards the EDL and Britain First.

**(b) National political responses to the English Defence League and Britain First**

One of the earliest notable national responses to the EDL and Britain First was John Denham’s intervention towards the former group in September 2009. Denham, then Communities Secretary, likened the group to Oswald Mosley’s Blackshirts (The Daily Telegraph 12th September 2009). In order to absorb some of the growth of far-right extremism more generally, Denham proposed £12 million investment in a ‘Connecting Communities’ programme aimed at tackling social marginalisation and political disengagement in white working-class areas. His diagnosis was that the success of the EDL, Britain First and other far-right groups had emerged out of a time of economic crisis (post-2007 credit crunch) and political crisis (post-2009 MPs expenses scandal) (*ibid.*). This more community-focussed inclusionary approach kick-started a strand of the UK national political response that would later be picked up by his Conservative successor, Eric Pickles, under the auspices of integration policy with the express aim of tackling the wider communal drivers of this particular form of extremism – or what Matthew Goodwin describes as ‘softer’ responses to the EDL, Britain First and other self-styled ‘counter-jihad’ groups, and involves ‘[u]npacking’ and ‘calming’ anxieties that fuel such forms of extremism (Goodwin 2013: 14). This more socially conscious trend of responses to anti-Islamic groups continued with the former head of Labour’s internal policy review, Jon Cruddas MP. In October 2010, Cruddas suggested that what makes the English Defence League and Britain First’s anti-Muslim ideology in particular so dangerous was its ability to connect with a ‘growing cultural, religious and political battle that is emerging across Western Europe’ (Cruddas 10th October 2010). Unlike Denham, Cruddas suggested that it is up to all UK political parties to ‘choke off’ drivers of support for the EDL, Britain First and other anti-Islamic groups through offering an ‘animating, inclusive and optimistic definition of modern England’ (Moynihan 25th October 2010).

Parallel to this was a nod to the – albeit small – threat of right-wing extremist terrorism in the renewed Prevent strand of the UK government’s broader counter-terrorism policy, CONTEST, in June 2011 (HM Government June 2011: 21). This started a key differentiation or distinction within the government approach to the EDL and Britain First between a more security-focussed approach at the Home Office and a more integration-focussed response at the Department of Communities and Local Government (DCLG) – with the former exhibiting what Matthew Goodwin calls a ‘harder,’ exclusionary response, ‘disrupt[ing] the actual pathways into these groups’ (2013: 14). An example of the DCLG approach, which became the lead government department to deal with extremism associated with

EDL, Britain First and other forms of ‘hate’ groups (DCLG 1: 2016), can be found in Department’s February 2012 policy report, ‘Creating Conditions for Integration.’ This suggested that tackling extremism and intolerance fell within a wider effort to foster and protect social integration, and specifically mentioned the EDL and groups like Britain First as a key antagonist of social integration (DCLG February 2012: 2). It came after a period when ‘the Coalition Government was formulating its policies and it wasn’t initially clear what it wanted to do in the space [of domestic extremism]’ (DCLG 1: 2016) – with a more ad-hoc policy of ‘talk[ing] to the local area to try and put them in touch with the right people’ going on between mid-2009 and early 2012 (*ibid.*).

Perhaps the most direct intervention against an anti-Islamic protest group by a senior national politician at the time, however, came in comments made by Prime Minister David Cameron after the 2011 London riots. At Prime Minister’s Questions on 11th August 2011, David Cameron, led a broadside against the English Defence League – when he suggested that: ‘I’ve described some parts of our society as sick; and there is none sicker than the EDL’ (HC Deb 11th August 2011, c1086). This initiated the start of a broadly condemnatory (rhetorical) strategy by the coalition government and other senior UK politicians – aiming to ascribe a ‘pariah’ status to these groups without formal legal proscription. For example, on a visit to Manchester in March 2013, the then Labour leader, Ed Miliband, labelled the EDL specifically as ‘abhorrent’ and suggested that the best way to counter the group was to issue a clean-hands, ‘non-response’ – encouraging local residents to ‘turn their backs’ on this form of anti-Muslim protest (Williams 1st March 2013).

The second major milestone – and what became the ‘centrepiece’ of the government’s approach towards the EDL, Britain First and other ‘hate’ groups (DCLG 1: 2016) – was the setting up of the Special Interest Group on Far-Right Extremism in January 2013. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, this was launched and funded by the Department for Communities and Local Government in partnership with Luton and Blackburn in Darwen Council (Counterextremism.Org 2014). Such was the importance of the group’s first conference that the Communities Secretary himself, Eric Pickles, gave a keynote speech on government integration policy. Entitled ‘United in Britishness,’ Pickles singled out the far-right, far-left and radical Islamist groups as ‘purveyors of hatred’ that are ‘anti-British’ (Pickles 5th September 2013). More crucially, in an earlier speech, Don Foster, the Liberal Democrat Integration Minister at the time, stressed that ‘local leadership is absolutely critical if we are to succeed in smashing the far-right in local areas’ (Foster 7th January 2013). This implied that the thrust of tackling extremism by groups like the EDL and Britain First would not be devised centrally but through DCLG seed-funded, local projects that helped tackle the drivers of extremism. As one senior civil servant involved in counter-extremism policy at the time suggests: ‘we saw [the EDL and other groups like it] as quite predominantly a local issue and one that we needed to support local areas on’ (DCLG 1: 2016). For example, between 2012 and 2014, this included initiatives by the Searchlight Educational Trust to organise news-sheets and community events in four areas vulnerable to

anti-Islamic protest activity, as well as Show Racism the Red Card's projects with young people to 'reject the narratives of groups' like the English Defence League and Britain First (HC Written Statement 154 18th December 2014).

The fourth major intervention by a national politician on the EDL and Britain First was a speech by Home Office Policing Minister James Brokenshire in March 2013 at King's College, London. In it, Brokenshire again restated the government's position of condemning the EDL and Britain First, their effects and their message (ICSR 13th March 2013). More interestingly, Brokenshire also hinted at the lower-scale of far-right terrorism when compared to Islamist or Al-Qaeda-inspired variants. In essence then, 'the Home Office and government ministers perceive the EDL [and other groups like it] as a . . . public-order problem rather than as a problem of [terrorism or] political violence' (Skoczylis 2015: 92). In comparison, a panellist and civil servant from the Tackling Extremism and Hate Crime Division at DCLG, Ian Bradshaw, at the same March 2013 event suggested that while violence may follow EDL and Britain First protest, the government didn't wish to classify the EDL or Britain First as active terrorist organisations (ICSR 18th March 2013). Moreover, he suggested the broad thrust of DCLG's approach was not just the group itself and its supporters, but the wider pool of people who are attracted to the groups' ideas and methods. Again, we can see the differentiation here between 'harder' and 'softer' approaches – with the Home Office taking a more security-focussed approach versus the Communities and Local Government department taking a more sociological approach towards anti-Islamic groups.

Post-Woolwich, the national political response to the EDL and Britain First then came to its third and final milestone – shifting to the guise of a broader response aimed at stemming anti-Muslim hatred. As one civil servant suggests, this looked 'more at the effects of the EDL and others [such as Britain First] are having on that whole kind of narrative of Muslims and non-Muslims in Britain' (DCLG 1: 2016). In a September 2013 speech to the Specialist Interest Group on the Far-Right, for example, James Brokenshire again condemned anti-Muslim groups as 'divisive' and 'contrary to the values of respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs' (Brokenshire 6th September 2013). Moreover, Brokenshire also outlined state-led responses to counter anti-Muslim sentiment – mentioning the government's national guidance on protective security measures for mosques, the ban of two leading 'counter-jihad' figures from the UK, and a cross-government action plan to tackle hate crime (*ibid.*). Interestingly, and in terms of context, this came in the wake of the May 2013 Woolwich terror attacks and the government's Extremism Taskforce that was set up in the wake of Woolwich.

Bringing this timeline further up to date, two years later, in October 2015, the government's long-awaited Counter-Extremism Strategy was released. This came after the transfer of responsibility for domestic extremism from DCLG back to the Home Office in late 2014 (DCLG 1: 2016). In a speech delivered by David Cameron in July 2015, the Prime Minister set out the four pillars of the new Counter-Extremism Strategy. This included confronting extremist ideologies,

tackling violent and non-violent forms of extremism, emboldening Muslim communities to tackle extremism and building a more cohesive society (Grierson 20th July 2015). Moreover, the strategy document itself stated the government's determination to tackle extreme right violence and the Islamophobia underpinning it – suggesting that the government's ultimate aim would take a robust approach to the hate crime associated with such groups (HM Government October 2015: 10). Following this, there was greater scrutiny and attention targeted at Britain First – with the communities secretary, Eric Pickles, stating that the group was on a par with hate preachers (The Independent 19th January 2015), one MP calling for a debate on whether Britain First should be banned (Hopkins 15th December 2016) and the Prime Minister, Theresa May, suggesting that the group sought to divide communities through its use of 'hateful narratives which peddle lies and stoke tensions' (Merrick 29th November 2017). Most senior politicians have, however, stopped short of proscription – suggesting that the group is too small to merit a ban (Whelan 19th June 2014).

### *(c) Conclusion*

In sum then, and using Downs' (2012) typology, the main thrust of the national response towards the EDL and Britain First has been a low-key, 'clean-hands' approach administered through localised means. This has sought to rhetorically condemn these anti-Islamic groups and their values, as well as using integration policy and public-order policing to provide what Goodwin (March 2013) calls, 'soft' and 'hard' responses to such groups. Rather than intervene directly against the EDL and Britain First in a 'top-down' manner, Home Office and DCLG officials interviewed for this book stressed how important it was that the EDL, Britain First and groups like them should be tackled at the local level and that as little 'oxygen' as possible should be given to the group's cause through a set of high-profile national interventions (Home Office 1: 2016; DCLG 1: 2016). Local authorities and constabularies have therefore largely been left to shoulder the responsibility of responses to the EDL, Britain First and their cycle of protests, 'Christian Patrols' and 'Mosque Invasions' – the main focus of this book, and to which we will return in the following chapters.

In addition to this, there has also been a noticeable 'twin-track' nature to the approach taken by central government towards the EDL and Britain First. This has seen a division or distinction between a narrower security-led approach adopted by the Home Office and a broader integrationist approach adopted by the Department for Communities and Local Government. Mainly due to the low level of national responses, there has been little or no tension here. It is, however, interesting to note that this separation was deliberately initiated in response to criticism about 'securitised social policy' under Prevent I (2007–2011), through the mixing integration and security lenses (ICSR 13th March 2013). Whether the re-housing of counter-extremism policy back at the Home Office in late 2014 will reinstate this conflation will be an interesting one to watch.

## **Identifying the lacunae: existing studies of policy responses**

While most academic attention has been focussed at the national level, there has been little attempt to capture and examine policy responses to anti-Islamic protest at a local level. In this section, we will look at what existing studies of anti-Islamic protest in the UK have had to say about policy responses – drawing out key distinctions that will be used for both the book’s typology and case study chapters.

Perhaps, in the UK context, the first study to consider responses to anti-Islamic protest substantively was Nigel Copsey’s seminal (2010) report on the EDL. Found in a highly comprehensive section towards the end of his study, here Copsey considers both formal (i.e. governmental and police) and informal (anti-fascist and Muslim) responses to the EDL. What he finds is that the 2005–2010 UK Labour Government tried to tackle the EDL under the auspices of ‘white working-class dissent,’ that the police have tried to deal with the EDL through use of the public-order legislation, that anti-fascists from Unite Against Fascism (UAF) have been the EDL’s ‘principal antagonists’ (p. 32), and that, while the response of Muslim youth to the EDL’s presence in Birmingham in September 2009 was a ‘critical factor in the equation’ (p. 33), ‘of particular concern’ to policymakers early on in the group’s development was the growth of self-styled Muslim Defence Leagues designed to mobilise young Muslim men in opposition to the group.

Despite its comprehensive nature, however, Copsey’s (2010) treatment has several flaws. The first is that, due to the brevity of his responses chapter, he is unable to deal with the phenomena in an in-depth fashion. The major pitfall of this is that Copsey does not have the time or space to expand on each sector of government and civil society that he touches upon. It therefore also excludes a thorough-going assessment of the sort of rationales and factors that might feed into responses to the group. Second, Copsey omits one key factor when considering responses: the role of local politicians and Members of Parliament. Such groups have been campaigning rhetorically and practically when it comes to responding to the EDL and other forms of anti-Islamic protest over the past nine years.

The second text to substantively consider responses to anti-Islamic protest is James Treadwell’s (2014) chapter on policing responses to the EDL. Based on ‘interviews with police officers, active members of the EDL and also extensive research fieldwork’ (p. 128), Treadwell posits that there has been at least ‘two distinct styles of policing’ since the EDL’s inception. The first was ‘a more heavy-handed and largely prohibitive’ style that sought to ‘robustly contain’ EDL protests while the second was a ‘much more neutral, non-confrontational approach, premised largely on . . . a less confrontational public-order maintenance strategy’ (*ibid.*). Treadwell argues that while there should be a ‘middle ground’ between confrontation and a more consensual style of policing far-right protests (p. 138), the latter has been proven to be the most effective and has ‘seemingly coincided with a fall in the number of arrests’ (p. 128). While such criminological aspects are not the purview of this book, it is significant to suggest that it will be through this ‘confrontation’ versus ‘consultation’ heuristic that policing responses will be examined.<sup>1</sup>

The third text to address responses to anti-Islamic protest is Chris Allen's (2014) article on Britain First. Contained within one paragraph towards the end of the piece, Allen characterises the governmental, policing and political response to the group as being 'low-key' (p. 359). The rationale behind this, Allen surmises, is to either stave the group off from 'publicity' or to afford 'politicians and policy-makers some thinking time' in order to tackle the group head-on (*ibid.*). Adding to this, Allen notes that few politicians have 'appeared to respond' to the group – with only George Galloway and Eric Pickles being prominent examples (*ibid.*). As this study will note, the empirical data suggests that this has not been the case – with numerous politicians being outspoken in denouncing the group when they have come to perform demonstrations, 'Mosque Invasions' and 'Christian Patrols.' It also sidesteps some of the tricky questions facing policy practitioners when dealing with a group like Britain First who often turn up unannounced and leave before practitioners arrive at the scene.

The fourth study to address responses to anti-Islamic protest in the EDL is David Renton's (2014) chapter on anti-fascist responses to the EDL from 2009 to 2012. In it, Renton suggests that the EDL's 'emphasis on marches . . . swung attention back to UAF' after a period of ascendancy by rival anti-fascist outfit, Hope not Hate, under the neo-fascist British National Party (p. 256). Moreover, he states that opposition from left-wing organisations factored in the decline of the EDL from February 2011 onwards – citing that 'a fault line between those who wanted to keep the EDL a single-issue campaign and those who just wanted to attack "communists"' opened up as a result of repeated physical confrontations with the far left (*ibid.*: 260). Contrary to Copsey (2010), who largely sheds a negative light on early anti-fascist involvement with the EDL, then, Renton evaluates UAF opposition to anti-Islamic protest as one of 'finally moving in the right direction' (*ibid.*: 261). While difficult to elaborate on, this book will look both at what Copsey (2000) describes as 'active' and 'passive' forms of anti-fascism during the period under study – unearthing the tensions inherent in more militant responses versus legal forms of resistance to anti-Islamic protest.

The fifth and final contribution that tries to make sense of policy responses – widely conceived – is Matthew Goodwin's aforementioned (March 2013) survey of EDL supporters. In the concluding section of his Chatham House report, Goodwin makes a useful and timely distinction between 'harder' and 'softer' responses. 'Harder' responses relate to efforts by governments to prevent vulnerable individuals from being radicalised and therefore being sucked into extremist 'counter jihad' groups (p. 14), while 'softer' responses relate to efforts to address 'misperceptions and hostility within the wider public towards Islam and the role and perceived compatibility of Muslim communities' (*ibid.*). Overall, Goodwin sides with the latter – suggesting that '[u]npacking and calming . . . anxieties is a key task.' This, he suggests, is vital in defusing support for 'counter-jihad' groups like the EDL and Britain First (*ibid.*).

While these harder and softer descriptors will be used later in this study, there are, however, a few criticisms that can be levelled at Goodwin's attempts at categorising policy responses. The first is that the 'harder-softer' categorisation is too

vague – both in its scope and the actors it references. While such a categorisation does come with useful suggestions, there is no systematic typology to outline the universe of tactics that could be usefully pursued by politicians to challenge such groups. Second, and related to its vagueness, we are left unsure at what level such responses should be delivered. While we can envisage a role for citizens at the ‘softer’ level and the government at the ‘harder’ level, Goodwin’s categorisation (perhaps unintentionally) under specifies the type of actors he is referring to. Third, and related to this, the interventions envisaged by Goodwin are more administrative than political. While satisfactory at the level of government policy and amongst more sociological responses, this would fall short of providing a satisfactory framework for assessing responses anti-Islamic protest at a political level – unpacking the sort of political considerations involved in combating this particular form of protest.

### Moving towards a new framework: exclusionary and inclusionary responses to anti-Islamic protest

Before proceeding to the case study chapters, we will first set out possible strategies in the arsenal of policy elites when responding to anti-Islamic protest. This is mainly due to the absence of such a typology in the research literature on UK-based anti-Islamic groups, but it will also serve a more utilitarian purpose – aiding our analysis and comparison of policy responses when it comes to the empirical chapters. Here (Figure 2.1), we will use a combination of the European literature on mainstream responses to radical right-wing populist parties – as well as Goodwin’s (March 2013) ‘harder-softer’ distinction – as our guide. We will argue that

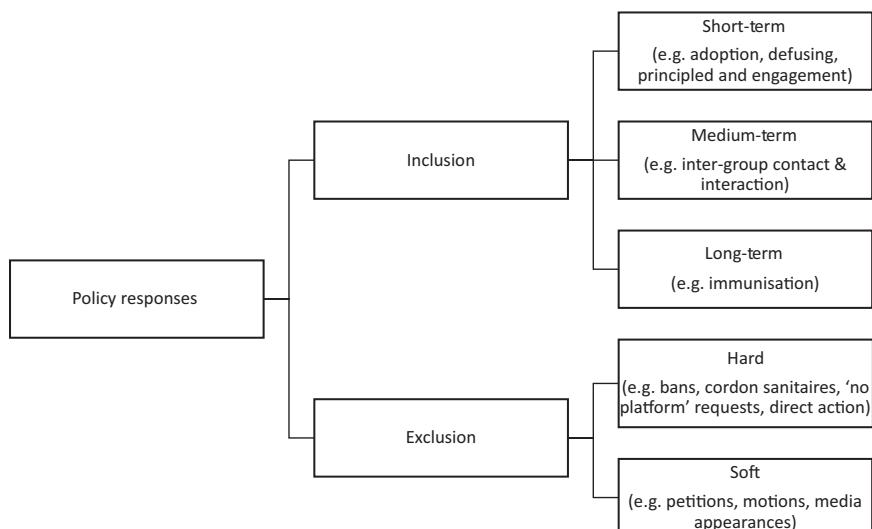


Figure 2.1 Typology of policy responses

policy responses to far-right groups can be separated into three distinct ‘ideal’ types: ‘exclusionary,’ ‘inclusionary’ and a ‘non-response.’ Moreover, there can be responses at a system-level, which vary between ‘militant,’ ‘defensive’ and ‘immunizing’ forms of democratic defence. In terms of exclusionary responses, this can be further sub-divided into two different degrees of response: ‘hard’ versus ‘soft.’ Furthermore, despite being costly in terms of time and resources, it will be argued that interaction – as well as system-level immunisation measures – provide the most sustainable long-term treatment of anti-Islamic prejudice that fuel far-right protest groups, like Britain First and the EDL.

#### **(a) Exclusionary responses towards anti-Islamic protest**

One of the most universally known short-term strategies adopted by mainstream elites to deal with far-right and anti-Islamic protest actors, like the EDL and Britain First, has been to try to exclude such actors. For example, in David Art’s (2007) comparative study of recent far right success and failure in Austria and Germany, he argues that the failure of the Republikaner Party (REP) in the early 1990s was due to a rapid and co-ordinated response by German mainstream newspapers and politicians to starve it of the ‘oxygen of publicity’ through the press and erecting a ‘cordon sanitaire’ around the group through actively isolating the REP within Parliamentary and electoral activities. These effectively muted the group’s impact by making sure that it could not gain a ‘platform’ or participate in democratic debate (Goodwin 2011: 23).

Such a policy of exclusion has been broadly applied to anti-Islamic protest in the UK. Many elites either petition for a ban on the groups’ marches or rhetorically campaign against the groups in local media and the press over the course of a protest. While Members of Parliament are not part of the UK public-order protocol, they can bring to bear considerable pressure on police and local authorities to take action and issue a march ban under Section 13 of the 1986 Public Order Act. This can be through championing petitions, using Parliamentary procedures (such as Early Day Motions or Parliamentary Questions) or through their responses in the media.

Moreover, Councillors can adopt similar strategies, albeit at a more local level, by forwarding motions against anti-Islamic protest groups in Council chambers, talking to the local press and voting to action Section 13 of the 1986 Public Order Act which allows for the banning of demonstration marches. Furthermore, for Councillors who directly liaise with the police and protest movements in the run up to a demonstration, it might also include a policy of not speaking to or refusing to negotiate with the anti-Islamic protest group in question. These ‘softer,’ more institutionalised forms of exclusion take a broadly liberal-legal approach that closes down the ‘opportunity structure’ for anti-Islamic groups and operates through more indirect means.

In conjunction with these ‘soft’ exclusionary approaches, there are also ‘harder’ forms of anti-far-right response that work outside the existing institutional parameters. This would involve a Member of Parliament or Councillor attending counter

demonstrations, petitioning for far-right groups to be proscribed or setting out other restrictions not outlined in the law already. In terms of the latter, this might involve the potential levying of fines against anti-Islam protesters or delimiting areas that such groups can protest in. For those who take to the streets, the more direct action side of what we are going to call ‘hard exclusion’ would be based on the principle that far-right groups should always be confronted and that they should not be given any platform to protest or express their views, especially in areas with high proportions of the groups’ ‘target’ population (i.e. the UK’s Muslim community).

The long-term effectiveness of exclusionary strategies on far-right parties can be questioned, however. Opponents of such a strategy argue, for example, that such attempts by mainstream elites to exclude far-right groups can count in the group’s favour by reinforcing their outsider status (Goodwin 2011: 23). Moreover, empirical studies show that isolation can breed ideological radicalisation (Van Spanje and Van Der Brug 2007: 1035) and that cooperation can help moderate a group’s anti-establishment appeals (Downs 2002: 33). Furthermore, exclusion doesn’t tend to engage with the social drivers that fuel right-wing extremist protest more generally, nor does ‘hard exclusion’ (in the form of counter protesting) help stop the disruption caused by far-right protest groups. Indeed, as we will see in Chapter 7 on Tower Hamlets, it can make matters worse – with physical confrontation leading to greater public disorder.

### **(b) Inclusionary responses towards anti-Islamic protest**

On the other side of the response debate are also short-term inclusionary strategies. In this book, ‘inclusion’ will be taken to mean: politicians’ short-term attempts to engage with white working-class communities that may support, or Muslim communities affected by, anti-Islamic protest. Furthermore, in the medium term, it also entails actions by local political elites to address the underlying causes of extremist politics by targeting the sources of political alienation and anti-Islamic prejudice within their communities. What we are talking about here, therefore, is *not* the inclusion of the anti-Islamic activism into the UK’s political mainstream or even for mainstream politicians to work alongside anti-Islamic groups, but to engage with and foster interaction between those prone to support these organisations (i.e. the white working-class) and those affected by it (i.e. UK Muslims) – restoring trust within both communities who may not feel that the UK state has their best interests at heart. Whether this more sustained work is being done is a patchy and fragmented picture. What we will find in the course of this study is that the shorter-term work of engagement with Muslim and white working-class communities is being carried out, albeit at a fairly low-scale and piecemeal level.

One of the most controversial tactics proposed by supporters of this ideal type is for mainstream politicians to pander to the prejudices of those that loosely support these groups. Named by Tim Bale et al. (2010: 413) as the ‘adoption’ strategy, this would, for example, involve supporting more restrictive policies on immigration or ‘stringent’ citizenship tests in order to defuse support for right-wing

populist groups. A key example of this was in 1978 when Margaret Thatcher suggested that Britain was ‘being swamped by alien cultures.’ For example, Herbert Kitschelt, a leading scholar studying the far right, attributes this as being an important factor in preventing the National Front’s breakthrough at the 1979 General Election (Kitschelt 1995: 49). The key demerits of such a tactic for elites are, however, obvious: speak too long on the subject and you might end up giving ‘oxygen’ to extremists and their diversity-phobic agenda; speak too infrequently and you ‘risk looking opportunistic’ (Bale et al. 2010: 413).

On a similar note, another possible short-term inclusivist strategy that elites might adopt towards a group is to try to ‘defuse a new political issue, to decrease its salience or at least its relevance to electoral competition’ (*ibid.*). This involves essentially trying to ‘reset the political agenda’ and turn it away from toxic debates on immigration and focus on its benefits (*ibid.*). The main problem with the ‘defuse’ strategy, however, is its indirect nature. It therefore runs the risk of ignoring the grievances and attitudes that lie behind anti-minority, anti-migrant or anti-Islamic positions. Another similar strategy would therefore be for politicians to hold onto their principles and simply communicate the benefits of their positive immigration policies in a more persuasive and vocal way to far-right voters. Such a tactic is, however, hard to adopt ‘in the face of electorates that are, on the whole, hostile to these trends’ (Goodwin 2011: 26). More sustainable inclusivist strategies, therefore, may involve strategies that actually tackle the underlying social issues that give rise to right-wing populist support in the first place.

A key example of inclusivism involves mainstream parties and politicians simply taking the time to talk directly with voters in the local arena and ‘engage in conversations about difficult issues’ (*ibid.*: 25). This can be extended to responses when a group like the EDL or Britain First comes to protest – engaging both the group in question, the (Muslim) communities affected by the group’s presence and those from the local (i.e. white working-class) community prone to be ‘sucked in’ by the groups. The key merit of engagement is that it counters the ‘elite critique’ at the heart of right-wing populist groups: that they are giving ‘voice to the voiceless’ and represent views that ‘the mainstream wouldn’t dare to engage with.’ The key demerit of this strategy is, however, that it takes both time and resources to do it properly – requiring elites to conduct sustained work and create substantial links with groups that they might not normally interact with. Moreover, extremist-prone individuals may not be open to being approached by mainstream politicians, nor receptive to what they have to say.

While engagement may counter one barb of the far right’s more populist appeals (that political elites are ignoring ‘the people’), a similar medium-term strategy can be aimed at tackling support for the more xenophobic and prejudicial aspects of right-wing populist parties’ policy programmes and messages. Based on the social scientific notion of ‘intergroup contact’ theory (Allport 1954; Savelkoul et al. 2011; Pettigrew and Tropp 2008), an ‘interaction’ strategy aims to break down barriers of estrangement and hostility between communities by bringing them together through informal activities and Council-run initiatives. These can take the form of local authority run projects like ‘Luton in Harmony,’

‘Be Birmingham’ and ‘One Tower Hamlets’ that come under the ‘community cohesion’ agenda. As we shall see, setting up such projects is largely the realm of Council officials and not elected politicians.

Though interaction is possibly one of the most sustainable counterstrategies within the inclusivist school, it does have a series of demerits or ‘health warnings’ attached to it. First, quite stringent conditions need to be put in place if such interactions are going to be meaningful and enduring. For example, ‘intergroup contact theory’ suggests that there are at least four criteria that need to be kept in mind for such meetings to be a success. The first is equal status between participating groups, the second is the sharing of common goals within the mode of interaction, the third is proper cooperation between groups and the final one is that such activities are backed by authorities, the law and customs of the land in which it is taking place (Pettigrew and Tropp 2005: 264–266). Second, and as Goodwin (2011: 27) comments, the risks of superficial interaction can outweigh the benefits of this particular activity – especially if they confirm suspicions and therefore fuel tensions (*ibid.*). Finally, fostering cooperation and interaction is, again, a time- and resource-intensive activity. It requires substantial ‘buy-in’ from local Councils and individuals alike, and even then it is not guaranteed to work.

### *(c) The counterfactual: a ‘non-response’*

Going back to shorter-term responses, one other strategy in the arsenal of mainstream elites when dealing with groups like the EDL and Britain First is to choose to ignore them entirely, or issue a ‘non-response.’ Obviously, this does not extend to emergency services and those obliged to manage (both legal and illegal) actions by anti-Islamic groups, but local politicians and elites who are at the liberty of refusing to acknowledge the far-right’s presence. Like exclusion, the desired effect of a ‘non-response’ is to not give far-right groups the ‘oxygen of publicity’ that they wish, or, in a public-order context, ramping up the ‘hype’ around such protests and therefore contributing to a ‘breach of the peace.’ This speaks to the essentially *conservative* logic behind such a strategy – suggesting a significant degree of gradualism and wariness of unintended consequences when implementing such interventions. As we will see later in the conclusion, ‘non-responses’ have previously been used in combating the British National Party and have been dubbed by some scholars as a ‘clean hands’ approach towards the far-right and pariah parties (Downs 2012: 32–33).

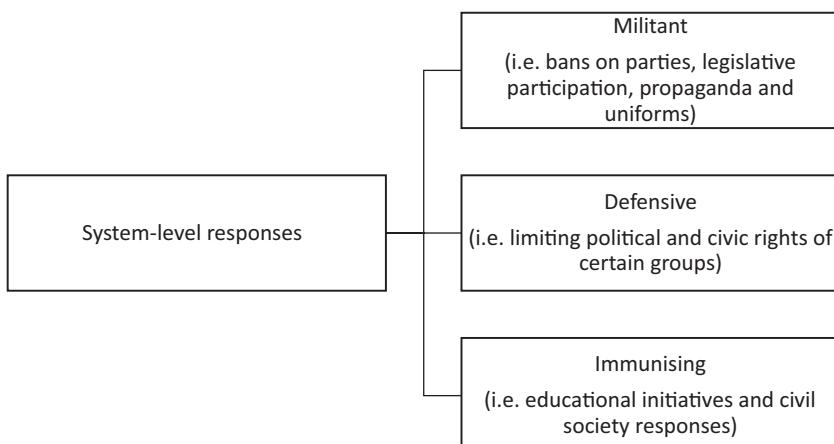
The major downside of issuing a rhetorical or campaigning ‘non-response,’ however, is that it risks demonstrating a complacency about the threat of anti-Islamic protest, particularly when it comes to Britain First, and the issues that it touches upon around religious identity, immigration and diversity (*ibid.*: 2012). It therefore should only be used when the potential for a group to mobilise its supporters and therefore to pose a ‘threat’ is low, and even then it should be strategy of last resort. The ‘non-response’ strategy does, however, serve as an important counterfactual to the current study, and opens up some important philosophical questions such as: Can a non-response be better than poorly administered

exclusionary or inclusionary policy response? Do certain public servants need to respond to anti-Islamic street movements at all? Finally, what weighty normative judgements lie behind those who feel a need to issue responses when there's no functional or instrumental imperative to do so?

### **Taking the long view: system-level responses to the UK far right**

While we have talked about a number of short- and medium-term strategies needed to respond to anti-Islamic protest, it is also important to note that longer-term, system-level approaches exist and have been suggested by several academics in order to address the presence of extremist groups in Western democracies (Figure 2.2). This is based on constitutional lawyer and political scientist Karl Loewenstein's inter-war writings on how democratic states could 'withstand fascism's skilful exploitation of democratic rights to subvert democracy from within' (Capoccia 2013: 208). It is through the use of 'special measures' to enable democracies to 'weather the storm' of fascism (*ibid.*). This encompasses the twin concepts of defensive and militant democracy, and what measures (for example, bans on parties, legislative participation, propaganda and uniforms) are needed to safeguard democracy against anti-system threats.

The most persuasive of these writings is by the Israeli-American professor Ami Pedahzur and his concept of an immunised democracy. In 2001, for example, Pedahzur used the notion of an 'immunised democracy' to describe a nation state, such as the United States, where a low-level, limited and well-defined approach to tackling extremist violence exists (p. 356). In a later (2004) work, Pedahzur develops this notion of 'immunised democracy' further by suggesting that 'strong civil society' from below and 'high civic educational barriers' from above are



*Figure 2.2 Typology of system-level responses*

needed to counteract the influence of far-right groups in the political sphere. The idea behind this is that low-level, long-term preventative work is better than last-minute authoritarian interventions when dealing with the ‘illness of extremism’ (p. 116). More practically, Pedahzur suggests that this can be achieved in schools by ‘the inculcation of democratic values and tolerance’ as well as through civil society campaign groups ‘tak[ing] an active role in the political theatre’ (*ibid.*). Such a system-level approach will be endorsed by this book – suggesting that longer-term appraisal of the preventative work done is needed to sustainably avert the peril of far-right extremism in the UK.

This is in contrast to, and is a gentler version of, the ‘militant democracy’ researched by scholars like Giovanni Capoccia. This entertains the notion that ‘the use of legal restrictions on political expression and participation’ may be resorted to when a democratic system is facing an existential threat (Capoccia 2013: 207). This more militant mode is the subject of a 2001 article by Capoccia, who examines the success of Czechoslovakia, Finland and Belgium (versus Italy and the Weimar Republic) in warding off insurgent far-right actors during the inter-war period. In it, he finds the actions of ‘border parties,’ or parties who ‘generally face a choice: either they make a common front’ or ‘they put their immediate electoral interests first’ (p. 438), and heads of state as crucial in leading repressive action towards such insurgents. While Capoccia points out the merit and necessity of inclusive strategies, he still implicitly supports the stance that ‘tolerating anti-democratic . . . forces might lead the system to collapse in a time of crisis’ (p. 432) and that, in the short term, at least, civil and political rights open to right-wing extremists should be restricted in order to choke off this particular form of extremism.

One middle ground between immunised and militant forms of democratic safeguards is ‘defensive democracy,’ whereby political and civic rights and freedoms are again limited in order to protect democratic institutions, values and traditions. Two scholars who look at this more defensive mode are Dutch political scientists, Stefan Rummens and Koen Abts. In a 2010 article, they advocate a ‘concentric containment model’ that tracks the relevant concerns of citizens towards extremists and filters out extremist policies that are not compatible with core values of liberty and equality; thus decreasing ‘tolerance towards extremist organisations as they approach the centres of formal decision-making power’ (p. 663). Again, however, this has potential scarring effects on the quality of democracy within a particular country and should be thought about carefully by elites before such action is resorted to – particularly if it is implemented in a draconian way. Such dilemmas will become apparent in Chapter 3 as we consider Luton’s response to the EDL and Britain First.

A more recent turn in the scholarship looking at defensive system-level responses to anti-system threats (such as far-right extremism) is a social democratic form of self-defence. Political scientists, Dr Anthoula Malkopoulou and Dr Ludvig Norman (2018), criticise the inherent elitism of the militant approach with its focus on parties (p. 447) and the ‘thin’ notion of democracy (p. 450) outlined in Rummens and Abts’ (2010) more procedural approach. Founded upon

expanding political participation and great homogeneity between social classes, Malkopoulou and Norman's social democratic approach therefore attempts to head off crises in democracy that give rise to extremism by fostering greater social cohesion (based on trust, empathy and solidarity) (p. 453). This, they say, could be enacted through democratic education and other opportunities for greater self-realisation (e.g. jobs) within society that could help to stave off the extremist threat (pp. 451–452).

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, then, and with the help of comparative European literature on far-right responses, we have identified three strands of response when talking about anti-Islamic protest: exclusion, inclusion and 'non-response.' Within this, though, there are a multitude of smaller responses – providing a more elaborated analytical framework than Goodwin (March 2013) and others when addressing responses to this particular form of political extremism. In the case of exclusion, we suggested that there can be both 'hard' and 'soft' responses, while, in the case of inclusion, there exists short-, medium- and long-term subtypes. In terms of evaluation, what has been found is that while exclusionary strategies have mixed results in successfully annulling the threat of radical right-wing populism, inclusionary strategies contain more sustainable routes when aimed at curbing the drivers of such political phenomena. In particular, medium-term counterstrategies which promote engagement between politicians and politically marginalised sections of society, as well as interaction between majority white and minority ethnic populations, have the potential to be the most effective. Furthermore, this needs to be further ensconced in system-level measures to 'immunise' UK democracy against the threat of extremism. Finally, and turning to the policing of anti-Islamic protest, it was decided that Treadwell's (2014) distinction of 'confrontational' versus 'non-confrontational' responses was the most helpful in assessing successful or unsuccessful public-order outcomes – with more heavy-handed and prohibitive approaches leading to upticks in violence and arrest numbers.

## **Note**

- 1 For a more cross-national look assessing policing tactics in relation to political protest, see Chapter 1 of della Porta, D. and Reiter, H. (eds.) (1998) *Policing Protest: The Control of Mass Demonstrations in Western Democracies*. London: University of Minnesota.

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### **3 ‘Where it all began’**

#### **Policy responses to the EDL and Britain First in Luton**

We ended up looking like Beirut with all these big metal containers where the police were managing them, and we said: ‘We’re not having this again. If this happens in Luton, it’s not going to look like this again.’

Hazel Simmons (2015), Leader of Luton Borough Council,  
commenting on a February 2011 EDL demonstration

Once again Luton is being targeted by a far right march. . . . These extremists will come and have a few beers and a lovely time spreading their message of hate but once again we will pick up the tab.

Gavin Shuker (Parris-Long 20th May 2015), MP for Luton South,  
commenting on Britain First’s June 2015 demonstration

#### **Introduction**

Luton holds an infamous reputation when examining the contemporary far right, and therefore deserves special attention when examining policy responses towards anti-Islamic protest. In March 2009, a group belonging to Al-Muhajiroun, a now proscribed radical Islamist group, picketed the 2nd Royal Anglian Regiment’s homecoming parade in the South Bedfordshire town (The Daily Telegraph 11th March 2009). Locals, infuriated by the sight of placards containing the words ‘butchers of Basra’ and ‘baby killers,’ set upon the protesters who had to be shielded by police (Judd 11th March 2009). This anger sparked an initial wave of localised protests under the banner of the United People of Luton (UPL). In June 2009, the UPL merged with the football hooligan collective, Casuals United, to become what we now call the English Defence League. This early story of emergence and coalescence demonstrates Luton’s credentials as being the place ‘where it all began’ when examining anti-Islamic protest in the UK, and has become the established narrative in the EDL research literature (Bush 2015; Copsey 2010; Jackson 2011).

Less well-known, however, is the significance of the town within the EDL’s subsequent protest cycle as well as activism by the EDL’s successor, Britain First. In February 2011, for example, the EDL held one of its largest demonstrations in Luton – with 3,000 supporters cramming themselves into the town’s

relatively small high street (Taylor and Davis 5th February 2011). Moreover, the following May, over 1,000 EDL demonstrators returned to the town with 1,500 police officers drafted in from twenty-seven police forces to manage the protest (BBC News 5th May 2012). More recently, the EDL mobilised 400 protesters in November 2014; this time to demonstrate against the authorities' inability to stamp out 'Islamic extremism' in the borough. In addition, Britain First has hosted a number of 'Mosque Invasions,' 'Christian Patrols' and demonstrations in the town – with a particular focus on so-called extremist elements within the local Muslim community. Since 2011, therefore, Luton's politicians and police have had to devise public-order and community cohesion strategies to minimise the reputational cost of subsequent large-scale EDL and Britain First demonstrations in the town – drawing thousands of activists back to where this current wave of anti-Islamic activism initially started (Figure 3.1).

This chapter will therefore investigate this hitherto understudied period of EDL and Britain First protest – examining how Lutonian politicians, Bedfordshire Police and the local community have dealt with the presence of anti-Islamic protest from February 2011 onwards. We will look at the recent history of the town – tracking the local drivers accountable for the EDL and Britain First returning to protest and responses to the groups, post-2011. We will also look more specifically at instances of EDL mobilisation in the town – focussing on the elite responses to the EDL's demonstrations in February 2011, May 2012 and November 2014. Last, and as a point of contrast, we will then examine subsequent mobilisations by Britain First (Figure 3.2) – investigating how Bedfordshire Police and local politicians adapted to the group's new and more direct repertoire of action. Finally, we will conclude by considering the impact of this current wave of anti-Islamic protest on Luton's politics. What we will find is that while Luton has been a key site of innovation in dealing with anti-Islamic protest, the extent to which this has been lawful and democratic still remains questionable. Before discussing this, however, we will first look at the twin processes of deindustrialisation and migration in Luton and how this informed – and shaped – the EDL and Britain First's initial and subsequent waves of protest in the town.

## Context

### *(a) Deindustrialisation in Luton*

Located in South Bedfordshire, Luton came to prominence in the nineteenth century. During this period, Luton's sizeable hat-making industry turned what was 'essentially [a] rural community' into 'a thriving industrial centre' (Dyer et al. 1975: 106). Like Birmingham and Bradford, the population of Luton also increased dramatically during the Industrial Revolution. For example, the town's population rose from just over 2,986 in 1821 to just over 36,000 in 1901 (*ibid.*: 101, 195). Such a period was a veritable 'golden age' for the town – with gas lighting, the building of the Town Hall and the establishment of a local newspaper, all happening within just a twenty-year period (Lambert 2015). The Town Hall (originally destroyed as a result of rioting in July 1919) remains a thriving centre

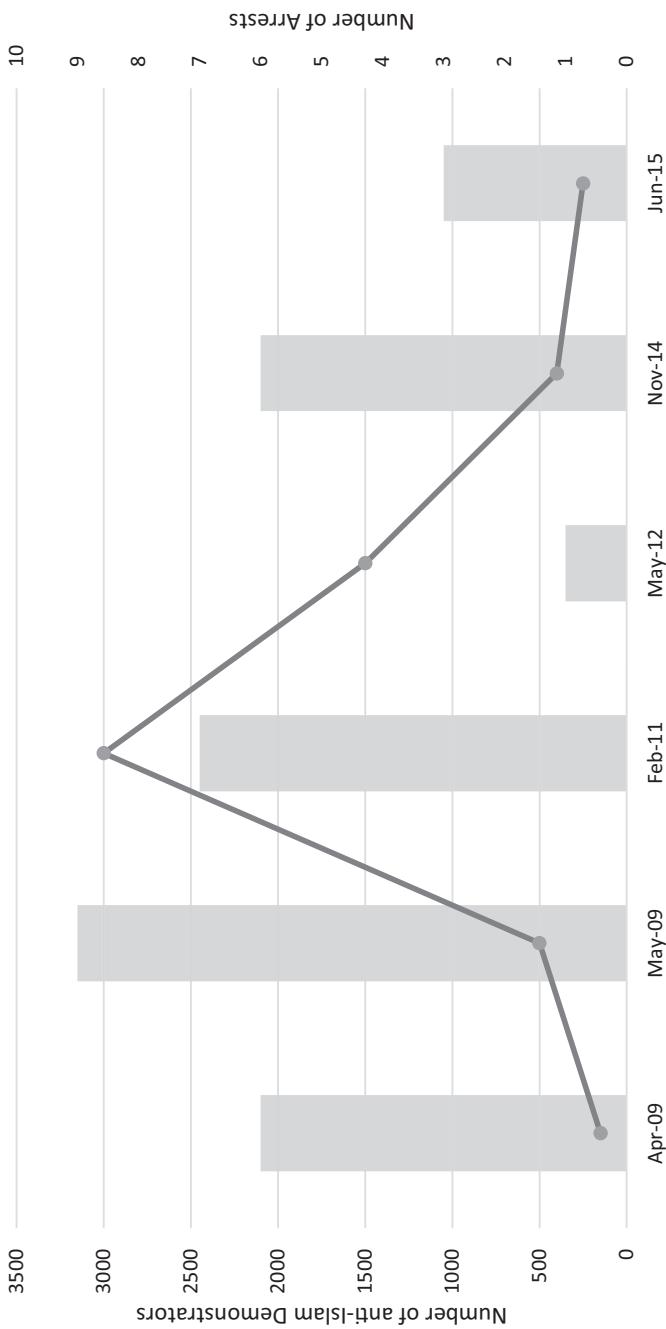


Figure 3.1 Luton's total anti-Islamic demonstrator turnout and arrest count, April 2009–June 2015

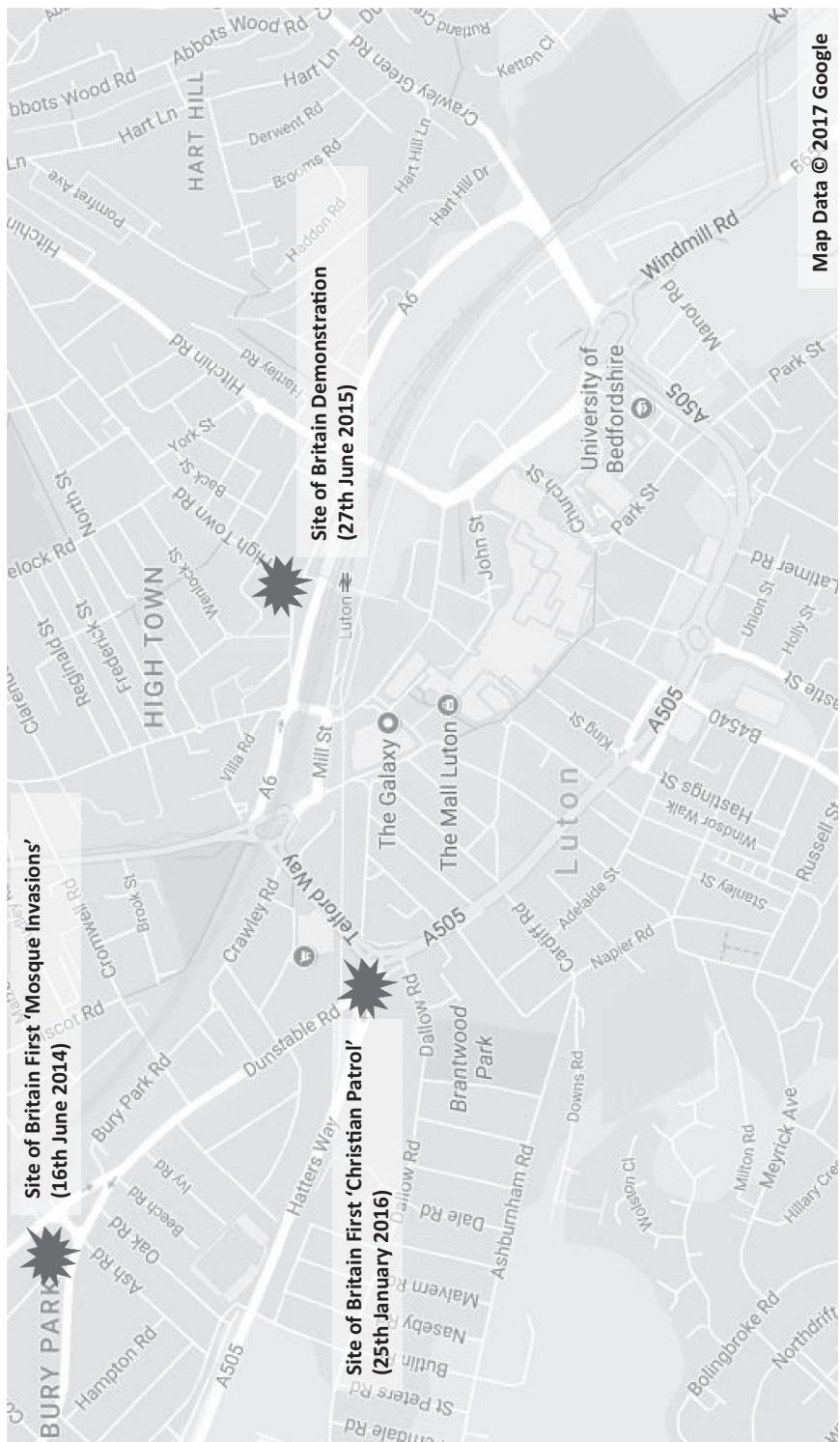


Figure 3.2 ‘Geographies of hate’: mobilisations by Britain First in Luton

of civic life to this day – housing the key administrative and political branches of Luton Borough Council.

During the early Georgian period, however, the local hat industry entered a period of sustained decline and engineering industries became the new centre of economic life in Luton. In 1905, for example, Vauxhall Motor Company opened its largest manufacturing plant in the town. This supplied jobs for thousands of locals and saw the town continue to prosper. During World War II, for example, Vauxhall made tanks as part of the war effort and reached its height as a local employer in the late 1960s. The 1980s was a difficult period for Vauxhall, however, with major employment cutbacks happening during that decade. Moreover, in 2002, Vauxhall Motors significantly scaled down its Luton operation. It now only makes vans and commercial vehicles at its Osborne Road plant (BBC News 21st March 2002). Once a hub of local economic activity, the factory now employs only a fifth of the workers previously hired during its post-war heyday (BBC News 17th May 2006).

This decline in industrial output – from the 1980s onwards – has had a significant impact on the town. Several areas of inner-city Luton are classed as being in the top 10% of the most deprived wards in the country with little access to a reasonable level of healthcare, education and work opportunities (Luton Borough Council August 2011). Moreover, in 2012, unemployment hovered just above the national average (Guest and Johnson 2012) – with 1 in 5 of Luton's working age population holding no qualifications at all (*ibid.*). In addition, the town's childhood poverty levels are amongst the highest in the East of England – with 25% of the town's children living in households with low or minimal income (Luton Borough Council February 2008). In a 2010 article, the Canon of a local Anglican church described Luton as 'a northern town in the south. The atmosphere reminds me of Oldham. . . . It's a friendly industrial town, not Home Counties posh' (Valley 24th December 2010).

### **(b) Diversity in Luton**

During Luton's twentieth century boom period, multiple waves of migration became part of what fuelled the town's economic success. The town was originally a site of migration in the early twentieth century for Irish and Scottish nationals, who came to build Luton's housing estates as well as parts of the M1 motorway, and stayed. Like other cities across the UK, the 1950s and 1960s also saw citizens from the Caribbean and Pakistan coming to Luton for a better quality of life and to work in the town's light industrial sector (Jackson 2011: 16). More recently, the early 2000s saw a rise of immigration from Central and Eastern Europe, with Polish nationals forming a significant contingent of recent residency registrations in the town (Mayhew January 2011).

As a result, Luton has become one of the first of what Jivraj and Simpson (2015: 49) call 'plural cities' in the UK, with no one ethnic group dominating the demographic landscape. For example, a significant proportion of the local population is now of either Indian, Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin, with Pakistani residents making up the largest minority ethnic group (ONS 2011a). Moreover,

122 languages are now spoken across the borough and over 60,000 of the town's residents are born outside of the country (Simmons 2015). In addition, the town is also religiously diverse – with strong numbers hailing from Christian, Muslim, Hindu and Sikh backgrounds. Furthermore, Luton has also recently seen a sizeable increase in the local Muslim population. At the last census, over 24% of residents hailed from the Muslim faith (ONS 2011b), an increase from 10% in the previous Census (ONS 2001). Along with Leicester and Slough, therefore, it can be quite credibly asserted that Luton is one of the most diverse towns outside of London (Philipson 2013).

This level of diversity has not been without its challenges, however. While segregation between communities isn't as prevalent as other places in the UK, the 'formation of localised [predominantly Asian] communities' within the areas of Biscoe and Dallow have been deemed by some scholars as particularly problematic (Jackson 2011: 16). Moreover, in the mid-1990s, Kashmiri newcomers were met with hostility by longer-standing Caribbean, Irish and Italian communities in the Bury Park area of Luton (Vallely 24th December 2010). Authors suggest (*ibid.*) that an equilibrium between new comers and more settled populations was eventually met, but again this episode highlights the social and cultural challenges posed by rapid transformations in local demography. As local Council Leader Hazel Simmons (2015), states: 'cohesion in Luton is a priority. That takes over.' Indeed, in January 2010, 'Luton in Harmony' was set up as a campaign aimed at 'promoting harmonious relationships across the town' through educational and cross-cultural initiatives (Luton 1: 2015). This has been largely successful – with 29,000 residents signing a neighbourly pledge in the initiative's first twelve months (The Economist 16th December 2010).

### **(c) Islamist extremism and right-wing extremism in Luton**

Luton has also had brushes with both Islamist extremism and right-wing extremism – with the former making the most news headlines prior to 2009. In October 2001, for example, it was reported that three young men from the town went to join the Afghani Taliban (Smith 30th October 2001). In 2004, Salahuddin Amin – known as the fertiliser bomb plotter – was reported to be from Luton and had encouraged support for jihadi fighters in the town (BBC News 30th April 2007). In 2005, Luton also became a staging post for the 7/7 bombers and in 2010 also housed the mastermind of the Stockholm bomb plot, Taimur Abdulwahab al-Abdaly (BBC News 13th December 2010).

Furthermore, Luton has also been long associated with key individuals and organisations within the UK's radical Islamist scene. Anjem Choudary's Al-Muhajiroun, a group linked to religious fundamentalism and international terrorism, has been 'strongly associated' with Luton for the last ten years or more (Jackson 2011: 17). In addition, Luton played a formative role in radical preacher Abu Hamza's early religious practice in the mid-1990s before becoming an imam in Finsbury Park (Sherwell 19th May 2014). This was of course until October 2012, when he was extradited to the United States to face terrorism charges (The Daily Telegraph 5th October 2012).

On the other side of the extremist divide, and prior to the EDL and Britain First, far-right extremism was conspicuously absent in Luton. This is strange, given the significant socio-economic transformations that have occurred in the town over the past thirty years. During the 2000s, for example, the British National Party never polled above 5% in either the area’s local or Parliamentary districts. While we know that key figures within the EDL were active in relation to the BNP locally, this was on a relatively low-level basis and only involved nominal membership of the neo-fascist party when compared with the leadership of Britain First (Jackson 2011: 7). Moreover, a meeting and a high-profile march by the National Front in the mid-2000s were a damp squib, with both being either cancelled or banned by local authorities – based on insurance and security concerns (Luton Today June 2006 and April 2007). Prior to and apart from the EDL (and subsequently Britain First), therefore, right-wing extremism was very much on the fringes of Luton politics and only displayed a marginal presence in the town.

#### **(d) EDL emergence and coalescence in Luton, March–July 2009**

Luton’s reputation for very low-level far-right activity, however, changed dramatically in spring 2009. On 10th March of that year, Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah, a branch of Al-Muhajiroun, picketed the homecoming parade of the 2nd Battalion of the Royal Anglian Regiment in the South Bedfordshire town (The Daily Telegraph 11th March 2009). As the parade reached Luton Town Hall, locals, infuriated by the sight of placards denouncing soldiers as ‘butchers’ and ‘baby killers,’ set upon the twenty or so protesters who had to be shielded by police for their own protection (Judd 11th March 2009). Unsurprisingly, this initial disturbance was widely picked up by the national press – with both the *Daily Telegraph* and *Independent* filing articles on the day’s events (The Daily Telegraph 11th March 2009; Judd 11th March 2009).

Over the coming weeks and months, an initial wave of localised protests took hold in Luton and a group named the United People of Luton (UPL) was formed. The first of these protests was meant to take place on 28th March 2009. Thankfully, the march was later cancelled. This was due to concerns about the potential for violence and more established far-right groups targeting the rally as a platform for their own grievances (Blake 2011: 14). A second march was, however, arranged. On 13th April 2009, 150 protesters turned out to hold a ‘Reclaim our Streets’ rally organised by the anti-Islamic blogger, Paul Ray. Six arrests were made as protesters demanded ‘someone in authority be held to account’ for the Al-Muhajiroun March protest (*ibid.*). In a classic case of cumulative extremism, where ‘one form of extremism can feed off and magnify other forms’ (Eatwell 2006: 205), the UPL were spawned and mobilised around grievances to do with Islamist extremism in the borough. Luton therefore was quickly establishing the reputation of being ‘where it all began.’

After the April 2009 demonstration, activities by the UPL quickly escalated from low-level protest towards a more menacing form of violent extremism. In the lead up to a 24th May UPL protest, a mosque linked to a local figure in Bury Park’s radical Islamist scene, Sayful Islam, was firebombed (Taylor 3rd June 2009).

Moreover, the cause of the group shifted from direct opposition to Al-Mahajiroun towards a wider grievance with ‘Islamism,’ ‘the spread of Sharia Law’ and Islamist extremism. In the end, over 500 protesters turned out with nine arrests made at the May 2009 demonstration as members of the UPL protest tried to charge directly towards Bury Park (Wardrop 25th May 2009). In Bedfordshire Police and Luton Borough Council’s first joint intervention against the fledgling group, the UPL was subsequently banned from holding marches in Luton for three months under the orders of then Home Secretary, Alan Johnson (BBC News 21st August 2009).

This escalation in numbers, and the creation of the football hooligan collective ‘Casuals United’ in spring 2009, led to the formation of the English Defence League earlier that summer. Most of the events around this period are not well recorded. However, Paul Jackson’s (2011) account suggests that it was around this time that a central organisation appeared in Luton – with key members of the local football hooligan scene, such as Kevin Carroll and Tommy Robinson, becoming more heavily involved in the group’s day-to-day activities (p. 15). Having been already been versed in violent disorder tactics on the terraces at Luton Town Football Club and involved in a ‘Ban the Luton Taliban’ protest in 2004, it seems somewhat inevitable that Robinson and Carroll – the former a member of the local BNP party in 2004, and the latter a key part of the skirmishes at Anglian Homecoming parade in March 2009 – would become more involved in the fledgling movement. In June and July 2009, the newly formed group began to coalesce and protests branched out from Luton and into other UK towns and cities, such as Birmingham and Manchester.

Despite the EDL moving its protests away from Luton in mid-2009 and the subsequent ban, however, the town still continued to be associated with the group. In June 2010, for example, the BBC produced the documentary ‘Young, British and Angry’ in which extensive interviews were given with Carroll and other prominent EDL figures in Luton (BBC Three 2nd June 2010). Moreover, in September 2009, the BBC ran a feature-length article on the EDL and Luton (BBC News 11th September 2009). Subsequently, there were three other documentaries commissioned in 2011 and 2012 that focus exclusively on Luton’s role in spawning the EDL (BBC Newsnight 2nd February 2011; Channel 4 29th February 2011; BBC Three 20th February 2012) – all of which added to the media frame and narrative that Luton was a ‘hotbed of extremism’ (The Daily Telegraph 13th December 2010). This negative media frame became a key driver behind responses to the EDL when it returned for subsequent marches in 2011, 2012, and 2014. Moreover, it was a key lens through which responses were devised when Britain First demonstrated in 2015. It is to these demonstrations that this chapter will now turn.

## **Part I: EDL demonstrations in Luton**

### **(a) *Luton's first English Defence League demonstration* *(5th February 2011)***

On 5th February 2011, the EDL decided to stage its first and largest ‘national’ demonstration in Luton. While no specific grievance was stated, the context of the

EDL returning to the town was symbolically important for the group: Luton was, after all, where the group had begun – and, as usual, the EDL were able to portray the town's large Muslim community in a particularly negative light. Giving oxygen to the EDL's cause, the then UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, chose to give a speech in Munich on the same day of the demonstration about the 'failure of state multiculturalism' and what he saw as the evils of 'passively tolerating extremism' (BBC News 5th February 2011a). The scene was therefore set for a buoyant turnout – with predictions of upwards of 5,000 protesters being made in advance of the protest.

In the end, however, around 3,000 EDL supporters turned out for the event. Even though a ban was not secured, the level of disorder expected by the police and the local Borough Council was altogether absent – with seven arrests made for assault and weapons-related offences (BBC News 5th February 2011b). Despite this, however, the financial and symbolic cost of the EDL returning to Luton was already done; the public-order policing bill for the day exceeding £1.2 million alone with most shops along the town's high street being boarded up in anticipation of the group's arrival (Johnson 17th April 2011). Most importantly, the EDL was able to march through and occupy the symbolic heart of Luton: the town's main St. George's Square.

#### *(i) Wider preparations*

The run up to the 2011 demonstration saw a number of precautions taken by local elites to minimise the EDL's impact in Luton. Like at Leicester's first EDL demonstration in 2010, the first set of preparations were around engaging with the local Asian community – reassuring nervous residents and targeting those likely to be caught up in disorder. This was facilitated through a flow of information from the Council into the local community about the day's events and how the protest event was likely to be managed. Businesses, taxi drivers and bus drivers were all kept informed as the day developed, as was the local community through local news articles, television appearances and visits to community groups conducted by Council Leader Hazel Simmons and the Chief Superintendent of Bedfordshire Police, Mike Colbourne. As Simmons (2015) observes: 'the best bet is to get your community to understand what's happening and the only way to do that is through communication.'

Added to this, engagement involved a deliberate targeting of the young and vulnerable in 2011. Like in Bradford, Labour Councillor Mahmood Hussain conducted a number of meetings with young people in his Farley Hill ward in the run up to the February 2011 protest (Taylor 31st January 2011). This involved responding to concerns by youngsters about the messages sent out by the EDL prior to the demonstration, as well as telling them not to be provoked by the group's presence. On the day itself, community centres were opened for local young people as a way of diverting them away from the demonstration (Simmons 2015). Moreover, another overriding concern was trying to make sure that the elderly were looked after and were not fearful of the forthcoming demonstration.

Again, Mahmood Hussain, executive portfolio holder for adult social care, championed the cause of the elderly and took steps to make sure that they didn't feel like 'prisoners in their own homes' (Hussain 2015).

Third, this type of engagement was also expressed within the more institutional mechanisms of the Council. A Community Cohesion Contingency Planning Group (CCCPG), which was convened in the weeks before the demonstration, acted as a community forum and facilitated discussion about how different communities were affected. It also allowed key community contacts to ask questions about preparations being made for the march and for residents of the town to be reassured about arrangements enacted by the police. It is important here to point out that the CCCPG isn't EDL specific. In 2011, it did, however, provide a place for Luton's local community to discuss concerns raised by the group's forthcoming protest and formulate a community response to the EDL's protest.

The second set of preparations prior to the EDL's 2011 protest was a more external-facing response that – as alluded to earlier in the chapter – tried to limit the damage done to Luton's reputation. As Council Leader Hazel Simmons (2015), comments: 'Luton's got an image [around the EDL] that's really been formalised by the press. So whenever something comes up about Luton, they talk about it. And we don't think it's fair because it does not reflect the town.' Sian Timoney, Councillor for Farley Hill and now Deputy Leader of the Council, was one of those who tried to combat this. In a 25th January 2011 article printed by *Socialist Worker*, she deployed this strategy suggesting that 'the majority of white people [in Luton] don't support the EDL... The vast majority of Lutonians aren't racist.'

Despite these preparations, the images broadcast on the day of the 2011 demonstration were not good for the town. Though only five arrests were made, metal barricades had to be erected to contain EDL protesters, shops were boarded up to prevent damage and the group were able to occupy a symbolic part of the town centre, St. George's Square. This was much to the disappointment of local elites, who wished to minimise the EDLs impact on the town and who were being pressured by the local community to ban the group. This set the wheels in motion for the creation of initiatives to tackle this inconvenience at future EDL demonstrations.

### *(ii) Political responses*

The advent of the EDL coming to demonstrate in Luton evoked an array of political responses in 2011. Most took an exclusionary approach, with a couple taking a more serious look at sustained responses to EDL protests. Hazel Simmons took a lead in providing an exclusionary response – refusing to meet with the EDL and enforcing a 'no-platform' approach when dealing with the group. This was despite the leader of the EDL, Tommy Robinson, wishing to meet with her in 2011, and was in response to numerous occasions where the EDL's former leader had either remonstrated with her in the street or at public meetings (Simmons 2015). Unsurprisingly, Simmons left it to the police to liaise with the EDL in early 2011.

Moreover, Simmons wrote – along with the leaders of the Liberal Democrat and Conservative Council Groups to the Home Secretary – in the run up to the 2011 demonstration (Luton Today 11th January 2011). Like in other cities, this was in order to attempt to secure a ban on the EDL marching in Luton and was raised amid concerns over the ‘risk of serious disorder’ (*ibid.*). It was also pointed out by Senior Councillors that there were also concerns about further ‘negative media coverage’ being generated in the context of revelations that the 2010 Stockholm bomber had been a local resident (*ibid.*). Ultimately, this intervention was unsuccessful; a ban was not granted, and the expected wide-scale disorder did not materialise in the case of the 2011 demonstration.

Apart from using legal measures to exclude the EDL from Luton, another prong of the exclusivist response was a number of local Councillors and politicians engaging in direct action, street politics. For example, MP for Luton North, Kelvin Hopkins, who had written to the Home Secretary for a march ban (Lancashire Telegraph 3rd February 2011), was involved in Unite Against Fascism’s 1,000-strong counter demonstration in 2011. This was based on the conviction that unconditional responses are necessary for groups like the EDL. For example, when asked, Hopkins posits that ‘whenever these kind of people raise their heads, you have to answer them’ (Hopkins 2014). Moreover, he saw his opposition in 2011 as vital to his role as an MP (‘our voters would expect us to stand up and be counted not just to hide away’) and was based on previous involvement in anti-racist campaigns during the 1960s (*ibid.*).

Another representative to be involved in the direct action side of exclusionary responses was Sian Timoney, who also attended the 2011 counter demonstration (Timoney 6th February 2015). The reason for this was simple – as a Councillor she thought it was ‘actually [her] role to stand up to people like that and say look that’s just not acceptable’ (*ibid.*). It was also a continuation of her attempts to counter incorrect and false assertions made by the EDL about the area – making it her job as an elected official to counter assertions made by the EDL and making sure that people had correct information about the town (*ibid.*). An example of this came in 2010 when the television channel BBC Three released a documentary about the EDL entitled ‘Young, British and Angry’ (BBC Three 2nd June 2010). Timoney, a Councillor from a predominantly white working-class ward where both of the group’s leaders grew up, was asked to respond to allegations that more money was being spent in Asian parts of the town. In her reply, Timoney stated that this was ‘entirely untrue’ and took the presenter of the programme, Ben Anderson, to an area where money was being spent on a new kids’ play area in her ward (*ibid.*).

In addition, a number of other local politicians took a similar direct action, exclusionary tack. Timoney’s colleague and fellow Farley Hill representative, Councillor Mahmood Hussain, was also amongst their number in 2011. He was of the view that principled confrontation was a viable response – stating that politicians ‘should respond as strongly as [they] can. You have to take on these racist groups head on’ (Hussain 2015). Richard Howitt, MEP for the East of England, also turned out to speak at the UAF counter demonstration in 2011 – saying that ‘the message to the EDL is clear: this is not your home, you are not welcome here’

(Channel 4 News 5th February 2011). A month prior to the 5th February demonstration, Howitt also signed a statement endorsing the UAF's counter protest in Luton, suggesting that the 'values of Luton are undermined by the activities of the EDL' (Unite Against Fascism 12th January 2011).

In contrast, there were a number of local politicians who decided not to take a direct action stance in 2011. For example, Gavin Shuker, Labour MP for Luton South, refused to take part in the counter protest on the day of the 2011 demonstration. His aim in doing this was to ensure the 'normal running of things in the town on the day' and to support the 'peaceful determination [by local people] to get on with our normal lives' (Shuker 2014). Instead, the newly elected MP took to the airwaves – criticising the wisdom of the speech of the then Prime Minister David Cameron about the failure of multiculturalism on the day of a prominent EDL demonstration, holding joint press appearances with his Luton North counterpart, Kelvin Hopkins, and petitioning with Hopkins and local Councillors to ban the group's march. In particular, he cited the potential for violence and the impact upon community relations as reasonable grounds to stop the EDL from marching (Luton on Sunday 1st February 2011).

David Franks, Liberal Democrat Group Leader, also took a less confrontational line to the EDL's presence in 2011. He admits to not being too sure when signing the 2011 letter calling on the ban of the EDL – suggesting that he is 'not instinctively happy with banning things' (Franks 2015). In any event, he thought that the Home Office's refusal 'made [Luton's] diverse population more determined that [it was] going to stick together and do something together' (*ibid.*). In spite of Franks' reticence, however, he made one of the most useful interventions in 2011. He wrote to the Home Office afterwards asking that the country and not just the town's residents should shoulder the cost of the police operation. He was successful – with the Home Office agreeing to foot the £1.2 million bill for the day's policing (Johnson 17th April 2011).

### *(iii) Summary*

In summary then, the EDL's February 2011 demonstration in Luton provoked an array of political and Council-led responses. In terms of the former, this was mainly around legal exclusion and direct action against the group, while in terms of the latter, it was about engaging the community in preparations for the march and combating negative media coverage around the event. On the day of the 2011 demonstration, however, it proved to be the most symbolically and financially costly of the EDL marches in the town. Mobilising over 3,000 protesters and 1,000 counter protesters, it was able to bring Luton to a standstill – with shops boarded up and the town centre effectively shut down for twenty-four hours. Moreover, despite the application for a ban, it was not granted. Local elites, therefore, did their best to signal their opposition to the group's presence and to ready the local community to withstand any tensions that may have had arisen as a result of the protest. In the end, however, these preparations were not enough to scotch the damage caused by the EDL to Luton's reputation, and was something elites were keen to avoid at future EDL protest events.

**(b) Luton’s second EDL demonstration (5th May 2012)**

On 5th May 2012, the EDL returned to Luton to demonstrate against a ‘Muslim group being allowed to march around the town hall’ (BBC News 5th May 2012). This picked up upon an incident the previous October when another proscribed radical Islamist group, Muslims Against Crusades, were allowed to march in protest against a police raid (Luton Today 3rd October 2011). Moreover, the 2012 march was politically significant for the EDL: it marked the first demonstration after the formation of a joint venture with BNP offshoot, the British Freedom Party, a month prior (Townsend 28th April 2012). In the end, the 2012 demonstration attracted 1,500 EDL supporters and 1,000 ‘We Are Luton’ counter protesters to the South Bedfordshire town (BBC News 5th May 2012). In an improvement on the low-level disorder of the 2011 protest, only one arrest was made in either camp in 2012 – with 1,500 police officers from twenty-two forces across the country drafted in to maintain order (BBC News 5th February 2015). Again the EDL’s presence came with a significant financial cost to the local area: the policing bill alone being well in excess of £800,000 (*ibid.*).

*(i) Wider preparations*

The lack of disorder in 2012 wasn’t a surprise to local elites, however. Unfortunately for the EDL, the group’s 2011 demonstration sparked a significant learning process within the town’s Council chambers about how they could better deal with this particular form of far-right protest. Not content with the EDL’s ability to march up to the Town Hall and disrupt the local community, plans were set in motion to make sure that the rights of the community would be placed over and above the rights of protesters. This initially spawned a public consultation on a new town centre policy after the 2011 demonstration.

Part of the motivating force behind this new town centre policy was the key mental marker of metal barriers in 2011. As Hazel Simmons (2015) suggests: ‘All the shop fronts had barriers on them. So we were determined as a town it wasn’t going to happen again.’ Moreover, another key motivating force was to issue the message that people could go about their daily business ‘as usual’ and protect the reputation of the town. Simmons continues: ‘What we’re trying to do is to get businesses trying to invest in Luton and if you get a front-page with all these barriers on it, who would want to come here and offer employment [to] people [who] might need [it]?’ (*ibid.*).

The impact of the February 2011 protest was also significant for policing tactics in May 2012. Following orders from Luton Borough Council, Bedfordshire Police moved the demonstration up and out of the town centre and towards the Park Street area of Luton. Moreover, Bedfordshire Police also moved the ‘We Are Luton’ counter protest to the opposite side of town in Wardown Park. The effect of these restrictions and provisions by the police were clear – re-balancing the emphasis away from facilitating EDL protest and towards upholding the rights of the local community to continue their everyday lives.

This is not to say that such restrictions were entirely unproblematic, however. Both the UAF and EDL strongly objected to Bedfordshire Police's decision to ban them from the town centre. UAF leader, Weyman Bennett, stipulated that it was a 'big mistake' to prevent the UAF from assembling peacefully. Moreover, EDL leader, Tommy Robinson, stated that the restrictions 'had nothing to do with the economy and the group was suffering discrimination' (BBC News 26th April 2012).

Another change to come out of the EDL's return to Luton in 2012 was heightened community response. As Hazel Simmons (2015) comments:

It's about Luton taking control of its community. . . . It's the community saying, 'actually this is our community we're going to protect our community.' And I think that's been part of [our successful responses to the EDL] as well.

This had two major manifestations in 2012: The first major expression of this was a community counter-demonstration held under the banner of 'We Are Luton.' Organised by Unite Against Fascism, it involved a coalition of local faith communities and trade unions with over 1,500 people descending on Luton for the day's events as they marched from Wardown Park to St. George's Square. Both Kelvin Hopkins and Gavin Shuker lent their support to the initiative and spoke at the march in order to show that 'the EDL were not welcome here' and to 'celebrate our diversity' (Unite Against Fascism 4th May 2012). Moreover, the counter protest was also to show that Luton is 'one community and we must stand together in opposing the EDL' (*ibid.*).

A second sign of a heightened community response to the EDL's return in 2012 was a volunteering scheme. Over one hundred volunteers from the local community wore yellow bibs on the day of the demonstration and acted as mediators between police and members of the community. According to a report about the scheme, volunteers also 'helped disseminate information, pick up and respond to community concerns in real time, and quash rumours' (Ramalingam December 2012: 11). This provided a voice for the local community besides police liaison officers and was praised by the report as being 'particularly helpful' intervention when groups like the EDL come to town (*ibid.*).

While Luton's policing strategy and level of the community response changed, the more apolitical side of the Council's response remained the same. Like in the run up to 2011, local shops and residents were encouraged to act as if it was 'business as usual' (ITV News 25th April 2012). For example, Council Leader, Hazel Simmons, insisted that the Council would 'support our businesses so they can trade as normal over the Bank Holiday weekend' (BBC News 26th April 2012). Moreover, other common themes included mentions of the EDL as not being welcome and unrepresentative of Luton. For example, on the day of the demonstration, Simmons was at pains to express her disappointment at the EDL's return and stressed that the day's events did not provide an accurate snapshot of Luton life (BBC News 5th May 2012). The motivation behind this was clear: to rehabilitate the town's reputation and to reduce the commercial impact of the EDL demonstrating in the town.

(ii) *Political responses*

In terms of political responses, the variety in 2012 was not as extensive as in 2011. One significant change that happened, however, was MP for Luton South, Gavin Shuker, and his attitude towards direct action. Having abstained from the UAF demonstration in 2011, Shuker joined Kelvin Hopkins on the ‘We Are Luton’ march. This change from a ‘non-response’ to a hard exclusionary one was mainly about simply being more ready for the EDL’s presence in 2012. For example, Shuker admits that he was slightly caught off guard by the EDL’s 2011 demonstration: ‘the first one . . . was just unprecedented territory. We just didn’t know what was going to happen’ (*ibid.*). Shuker therefore simply had not time to formulate an adequate political response in 2011 – something he was keen to remedy in 2012. The change towards direct action was also catalysed by a deeper change in the way the 2012 counter protest was organised. As Shuker (2014) explains: ‘Here [in 2012, it] was much more sense that this was about the community . . . [and] in particular to engage the mainstream of the Muslim community. Luton people vastly outnumbered the people from outside [in 2012] and I wouldn’t think that that would be true of the first time.’

Moreover, in comparison to 2011, we also saw other evidence of learning amongst Luton’s politicians. Sian Timoney, Labour Councillor for Farley, made a particularly mature intervention by warning counter protesters that ‘emotions run high and I would urge everyone to have a calm and peaceful protest’ (Luton Today 25th April 2012). This was to prevent counter protesters from breaking police lines and running towards the EDL, as well as to stop any actions that might have contributed negatively to the reputation of the town. This message, however, fell slightly flat as Timoney took a more belligerent tone elsewhere in 2012. For example, when talking to the far-left newspaper, *Socialist Worker*, Timoney stated that: ‘The EDL have threatened to come back to Luton every six weeks. I say they can sod off. We can come back every six weeks too’ (*Socialist Worker* 5th May 2012).

In addition, 2012 saw Timoney’s Farley ward counterpart, Mahmood Hussain, come out to demonstrate at the ‘We Are Luton’ counter demonstration. He saw his unconditional opposition as crucial. Drawing parallels to Nazism, Hussain was convinced that left unchecked, the EDL would have risen to a higher and more influential stature in Luton (Hussain 2015). For example, he suggests that: ‘You have to take on these racist groups head on . . . if you were to ignore them, which is what happened during the Nazis, that people started laughing at the Nazis and saying, “Hitler is a joke,” but just look at the consequences of it’ (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, Richard Howitt, MEP for the East of England, also came out to speak at the 2012 ‘We Are Luton’ counter demonstration. He suggested that the EDL were a ‘foreign body’ in Luton and called upon Lutonians to reject the EDL ‘virus’ and ‘show we are immune to its threat’ (Howitt 5th May 2012a). He also made links between the EDL and Oslo Bomber, Anders Breivik, insisting that the EDL’s recent venture into electoral politics must be ‘defeated’ (*ibid.*). Finishing his address, Howitt rallied the audience by saying: ‘We will not be scared. We

will not be provoked. [The EDL] are not Luton. We are Luton. (Howitt 5th May 2012b).

*(iii) Conclusion*

In summary, then, the decision by politicians on Luton Borough Council to draw what one senior Council officer refers to as ‘a line in the sand’ after the EDL’s 2011 demonstration was a particularly significant event in the town’s management of anti-Islamic protest (Luton 1: 2015). This resulted in a new town centre policy being consulted on and the successful use of policing restrictions to divert protesters and counter protesters away from the town’s main St. George’s Square. Moving on, when looking at the Council’s other preparations, the EDL’s 2012 protest spelt an increase in the role of community responses to the EDL when compared with 2011. In contrast, political responses to the EDL in 2012 were more muted – with some limited progression amongst one Labour Councillor (Sian Timoney) and one Member of Parliament (Gavin Shuker MP) providing the only major departures when compared to political responses at the 2011 Luton protest.

*(c) Luton’s third EDL demonstration (22nd November 2014)*

2012 did not, however, spell the end of EDL activism in Luton. Two years after the May 2012 demonstration, the EDL came to visit the South Bedfordshire town again. Now leaderless, the group only mobilised 400 people in late autumn rain, this time to demonstrate against the authorities’ perceived inability to stamp out Islamist extremism in the borough. Meanwhile, in quite a provocative act, around one hundred ‘We Are Luton’ counter protesters made their way to the Bury Park area of Luton to ‘Stop the EDL’ from entering the largely Asian area of the town (Parris-Long 13th November 2014). In the end, the march passed off reasonably peacefully – with six arrests being made and hundreds of police officers drafted in from as far afield as the East Midlands and Essex. Such a poor turnout was also a reflection on a broader EDL slump in support, post-Woolwich – with the newly ascendant Britain First emerging as the predominant actor on UK’s right-wing extremist scene. It also reflected an unsuccessful foray into local electoral politics. For example, in November 2012, EDL co-leader Kevin Carroll had taken part in Bedfordshire’s Police and Crime Commissioner Elections only to finish second to last with only 10% of the vote (Bedfordshire Borough Council 15th November 2012). By November 2014, therefore, the EDL’s ability to bring the town to a standstill was receding. This was reflected in Luton’s wider preparations and political response, to which we will now turn.

*(i) Wider preparations*

The response by the local Council and police in November 2014 rested in broad continuity with 2012. Like in 2012, the Council and Bedfordshire Police were on the ‘front foot’ when the EDL returned to Luton in November 2014. In planning

for the event, for example, police managed to push the procession of the protest even further up the main shopping precinct towards the University of Bedfordshire. While this did cause some minor disruption, it successfully moved the group out of the way on a key shopping day in the run up to Christmas. A marker of how things had changed since 2011, even the leader of Luton Borough Council, Hazel Simmons, could boast that she was able to shop at the time of the 2014 protest. Moreover, the day's events were hardly picked up upon by the national press (Luton Borough Council 22nd November 2014) – a coup for Councillors concerned about the post-2009 public image of the town.

Like in previous demonstrations, another prong of the 2014 preparations was to get out the message that the town was 'open for business' and that shoppers should not feel discouraged from entering the town (Luton Borough Council 18th November 2014). In a communiqué on Luton Borough Council's website on the Tuesday before the protest, Council Leader Hazel Simmons reassured residents that the Council and Bedfordshire Police had been working together to 'minimise the disruption caused, that businesses and shops were supported to open us usual and that people were enabled to go about their normal daily lives' (*ibid.*). In addition, she also called for calm on the eve of the EDL protest and reassured local residents that measures had been put in place to 'ensure that disruption and inconvenience is kept to a minimum' (ITV News 21st November 2014). Finally, Luton Borough Council and Bedfordshire Police continued a text-messaging service they had started to use in 2011. Used in other UK cities, this was designed to quash rumours and keep local residents up to date with developments on the day's protest.

Not all was the same in terms of preparation for the EDL, however. One significant sign of change was the Council's readiness to better integrate community and local voices into the preparations for the forthcoming protest. As one former executive portfolio holder for social justice claims, the 'whole strategy in 2014 was much different' (Luton 2: 2015). For example, a key aim in 2014 was to make sure that people were 'feeling that they were being heard' (*ibid.*). Moreover, the meetings prior to the 2014 demonstrations allowed community members to get their concerns and needs across to Council officials – facilitating a better dialogue between local residents and elites. It also allowed for dialogue to flow the other way – with the Council using it to put out its key messages of 'reassurance' and 'business as usual' directly into the community.

The second significant change was the creation of a three-page document (Luton Borough Council February 2013), which outlined Luton's new town centre policy. First formally voted in by Luton Borough Council in February 2013, this came into force in time for the November 2014 protest and excluded any events from St. George's Square that were deemed as undermining 'commerce, cohesion and . . . community safety within the town' (Luton 1: 2015). Such a policy was positive and negative for the town. In terms of the former, Luton Borough Council did something that was remarkable – re-balancing the emphasis away from facilitating EDL protest and towards upholding the rights of the local community. In terms of the latter, however, it also had potentially corrosive and deleterious effects on the quality of local democracy – allowing the Council to

ban groups based on a whole range of nebulous factors. While being a major step forward in managing EDL protest, therefore, it could also be seen as a significant step back in terms of democracy, democratic pluralism and tolerance in the town – if used in a draconian way.

### *(ii) Political responses*

As one might expect, the November 2014 demonstration did not see the same level – or variety – of political responses compared to previous EDL demonstrations in the town. Like in other cities, both of the town's MPs (Kelvin Hopkins and Gavin Shuker) stayed away from the main protest site and made little or no interventions in the local press and in Parliament around the day's events – with many limiting their response to signing a 'We Are Luton' and UAF 'Unity Statement' a few weeks before the protest (Unite Against Fascism 31st October 2014). Moreover, the response of the Council leadership was also restricted in 2014 – mainly expressing annoyance with the EDL's return due to the group's detrimental impact on the town's reputation and economic prospects (Luton Borough Council 22nd November 2014). In a sense, however, the town had moved on from its initial anxiety – successfully accommodating and normalising the EDL's presence within the rhythms of everyday life. In fact, the local Borough Council had become so adept in its dealings with the EDL that it was asked by the Department for Communities and Local Government to launch a partnership with Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council. This was 'to investigate the culture of the EDL' and to disseminate best practice across other Councils affected by EDL protest (BBC News 28th February 2012). In 2013, Luton therefore became a site of innovation for managing EDL protest.

Despite this overall muted political response in 2014, that year's protest did not deter counter protesters. Sian Timoney was one amongst the one hundred who turned out at the 'We Are Luton' counter rally in Bury Park. Timoney (2015) observes that the 2014 demonstration 'went very peacefully and of course [due to the scale of EDL protest] it was a much much smaller scale overall.' This type of principled response was reflected in Mahmood Hussain's actions on the day, as he also joined the counter protest. In an interview with the author, he suggested that he used his presence to reflect that – as an Asian, Muslim man – he was 'not prepared in any shape or form to be intimidated by [the EDL]' (Hussain 2015). This brand of direct action opposition was therefore alive and well in Luton in 2014 – albeit at a diminished level.

### *(iii) Conclusion*

In summary, then, the EDL's November 2014 demonstration continued a trend of marked decline when compared to the group's first demonstration in the town three years previous. While counter protesters were still happy to confront the EDL, many local elites chose to ignore the EDL's presence and made sure that the EDL's procession route did not affect the town centre. One important change in 2014 was, however, a heightened integration of the local community within

the Council public-order preparations for the protest event – consulting more widely on the concerns and needs of the local residents. By 2014, Luton’s ability to adapt to far-right protest had also made the national stage. This was reflected in the then Communities and Local Government Secretary, Eric Pickles, asking the Council to set up a Special Interest Group on Far-Right Extremism in January 2013 – pooling expertise, sharing best practice and building capacity with other Councils affected by this particular form of extremism (Counterextremism.org January 2014). It was also reflected in the formal approval of the Borough Council’s new town centre policy – successfully excluding the EDL’s presence from the town’s main civic and shopping area.

## **Part II: Britain First demonstrations in Luton**

With the gradual decline of EDL activism in Luton, however, the more militant Britain First had also begun to make an appearance on the UK far-right scene – with Luton able to construct a similarly innovative response. The first time the fledgling far-right group came to Luton was on 16th June 2014 – just prior to the EDL’s final demonstration in the town. Coming as part of what the group dubbed as ‘Operation Fightback,’ several of the group’s activists entered Luton’s Central and Bury Park mosques in a so-called Mosque Invasion – giving out ‘Muslim grooming’ leaflets and British Army Bibles (Tell MAMA 16th June 2014). Symbolising the links between Britain First and the EDL, the group’s stated rationale for such invasions was in response to the ‘ridiculous bail conditions’ imposed on the EDL’s former leader, Tommy Robinson (*ibid.*).

It was not until the summer of 2015, however, that Luton hosted its first demonstration by Britain First and really spread its wings in terms of a fully articulated policy response. Coming off the back of a 150-strong activist demonstration in Dudley, the group’s deputy leader, Jayda Fransen, stated that the rationale for the Luton march would be in order to ‘demonstrate that Luton is an English town not a mini caliphate’ (Parris-Long 20th May 2015). Hyping up attendance figures at both the Dudley and Luton demonstrations, Fransen stated that ‘we had around 500 turn up to one in Dudley the other week and we are aiming to get far more than that on the streets [of Luton]’ (*ibid.*). On the day itself, however, a combined total of only 250 activists demonstrated against what it saw as the presence of ‘extreme Islamic views’ in the South Bedfordshire town (BBC News 28th June 2015). Three arrests were made by police – with two hailing from the Britain First camp. As one senior politician in Luton noted: ‘the march went off peacefully . . . the police did a good job and it was [over] within an hour and half’ (Simmons 2017).

### **(a) Wider preparations**

Building on advances made in dealing with the EDL, as well as constructing new countermeasures, Luton’s local politicians and police were highly vigilant when Britain First came to Luton for the first time proper in summer 2015. First, and rather innovatively, Bedfordshire Police applied for an interim injunction

under the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime & Disorder Act 2014 (ITV News 24th June 2015). This was in order to prevent Paul Golding and Jayda Fransen, the leaders of the group, from taking part in the protest and came after a heated meeting on 8th June between community elders and the police where imams and community representatives spelt out that they had had enough of extreme right-wing demonstrations in the borough (Luton 4 2017). Unfortunately, the High Court did not permit this part of the injunction to go ahead (BBC News 28th June 2015). This did not, however, prevent the police from stopping Golding and Fransen from holding banners – reading ‘No More Mosques’ (*ibid.*). Moreover, other provisos of the injunction banned the two leaders from engaging in any further activities that might stir up religious and/or racial hatred – including entering mosques (ITV News 26th June 2015).

In lieu of a ban, the second intervention taken by Bedfordshire Police was to ‘double down’ on the route of the march – placing strict guidelines on where and for how long Britain First could march for on the day of the protest. The key stated rationale for such action issued by the Chief Superintendent of Bedfordshire Police, David Boyle, was for public safety and in order to reduce the impact of the march on Luton’s diverse communities as much as possible (ITV News 24th June 2015). Britain First protestors were, therefore, only able to protest from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. on the day of the demonstration. Britain First protestors were also restricted to a cleverly planned, circular route that took marchers in a loop away from the town’s main shopping street. This minimised potential for disruption and confrontation in Luton town centre, mobilised the new town centre policy initiated under the EDL and also reduced the visibility of the group.

Third, and like at previous EDL demonstration in the town, a significant amount of community engagement went into preparing for the 27th June demonstration. In public statements, Councillor Jacqui Burnett, an executive member of Luton Borough Council, reassured residents that ‘we have both worked hard to ensure that the rights of the local community are also respected and people’s views heard’ (Luton Borough Council 24th June 2015). Moreover, Councillor Burnett tried to normalise the situation – stating that the Borough Council was committed to ensuring that ‘business as usual’ on the day of the demonstration (*ibid.*). In addition, a warning was put out to caution young people to ‘stay away’ from the demonstration – stressing that criminal convictions could result from illegal activity perpetrated as ‘they could react and their whole life could be destroyed, the distress that their families would be going through if they were in prison. All that because of provocation’ (Luton 5 2017).

Fourth, and in terms of the community responses, a lot of interfaith work was put into preparing for the 2015 Britain First demonstration. For example, Church leaders met with local Islamic leaders in order to build bridges during a time of tension (HL Debate 29th June 2015, c1836). Meanwhile, and like in May 2012, members of local faith communities also acted as a point of liaison – facilitating an interface between local police and citizens. Such was the prominence of this action that it was referred to in a speech in the House of Lords by the Bishop of St. Albans (*ibid.*). In addition, Council frameworks to integrate community voices into the planning for far-right protests were again mobilised in 2015 – with the

CCPG meeting to plan out what they were going to do as well as writing a ‘very strong letter’ to the police outlining the risk of counter protests from the community (Luton 1 2017). Finally, local interfaith workers went as far as sitting down with Britain First’s two leaders to try and understand their concerns and stop their demonstration plans (Parris-Long 10th June 2015). Such a meeting was unsuccessful, however – with Fransen and Golding holding a small demonstration outside a mosque in Bury Park shortly afterwards. According to one of the interfaith workers involved, this was to ‘reach out to this emerging movement in a pastoral way not an anti-way’ (Luton 6 2017).

### **(b) Political responses**

As one might expect, however, the return of a far-right extremist group to Luton was largely met with an exclusionary discourse not seen since the start of the EDL’s mobilisations in the town in 2009. Gavin Shuker, MP for Luton South, led the vitriol against the new threat to community relations and public safety – saying that:

Once again Luton is being targeted by a far right march. . . . These extremists will come and have a few beers and a lovely time spreading their message of hate but once again we will pick up the tab. Luton taxpayers will be stuck with the bill for people coming in from outside of Luton.

(Parris-Long 20th May 2015)

Such views were echoed by Councillor Jacqui Burnett. In an interview with ITV News, she lambasted Britain First for demonstrating in the town. Drawing on recent history of anti-Islamic protest in Luton, she stated that: ‘It is very regrettable that yet again a group which is not welcome in Luton and which does not represent our town in any way is holding a demonstration here’ (ITV News 24th June 2015). Adding to this, she urged Britain First to: ‘Go away. . . . I cannot say it strongly enough. . . . The community are tired of extremist groups coming to us. . . . Find something better to do with your time’ (*ibid.*). Finally, deputy leader of Luton Borough Council, Sian Timoney, added her opinion to the despair voiced by Councillor Burnett by stating that: ‘the press will have a field day on it and again we’re in the news for bad reasons – let’s get us in the news for good reasons’ (BBC News 27th June 2015). As Timoney (28th February 2017) explains: ‘we do a lot of work . . . to get positive stories out into the media. And so when something like that comes along you just feel as if your kind of one step forward, four steps back.’

### **(c) Conclusion**

In conclusion, then, the arrival of Britain First for its first demonstration in Luton was an inauspicious occasion for the town. Having successfully fought off the peril of one anti-Islamic group, another had decided to turn up; albeit this time in smaller numbers. Fortunately enough, however, Britain First’s inaugural demonstration in the town went off largely peacefully. This was in no small part to the

lessons learnt when dealing with the EDL and innovative strategies to deal with the renewed ‘anti-Islamic threat’ – with Bedfordshire Police applying for a civil injunction and very smartly designing a march route for Britain First that missed Luton’s central shopping area altogether.

All was not plain-sailing subsequent to this initial Britain First demonstration in the town, however. On 25th January 2016, 25 Britain First activists returned again to the Bury Park area of Luton for one of its ‘Christian Patrols’ – holding white crucifixes and giving out leaflets to the local Muslim community (Parris-Long 25th January 2016). Such was the provocative nature of this act that Bedfordshire Police successfully applied for another injunction against both Britain First leaders visiting any mosques in England and Wales for the next three years – as one senior police officer notes: ‘you’ve an organisation here that’s got a track record of deliberately doing very divisive actions. . . It is a result of those actions that really mean that we had to act’ (Samuels 18th August 2016; Luton 4 2017). It also saw Paul Golding being arrested and subsequently convicted for wearing political uniform – a law not used since Oswald Mosley’s Blackshirts (Wright 1st August 2016). In a contribution to a House of Commons debate, Gavin Shuker summed up the frustration in the town when he said: ‘As a community, we face all sorts of challenges. We face down extremism daily. The far right – the English Defence League, Britain First and associated groups – regularly target our town’ (HC Debate 1st March 2016). The innovative use of Bedfordshire Police’s injunction therefore came out of this frustration – denying Britain First the right to go near a mosque, not just in Luton but across England and Wales. Not all was fraught in terms of responses to Britain First’s January 2016 ‘patrol,’ however. Members of the local church gave out flowers and read messages of peace in Bury Park in order to strengthen the ‘centre ground’ after the event (Luton 6 2017).

## Conclusion

Luton has suffered more than most towns and cities within our sample over the past nine years. Being where the EDL emerged, subsequent demonstrations by the group and Britain First have not just been a test of how well they have been able to minimise the group’s impact on the civic life of the town, but also local politicians’ ability to rehabilitate its reputation in the eyes of the national and international audiences away from the ‘hotbed of extremism’ media narrative – with both groups happy to resurrect the narrative on every occasion. A hitherto understudied period of anti-Islamic protest, what has been found in this chapter is that the responses of Lutonian politicians to the EDL and Britain First’s post-2011 protests have been both exemplary and problematic: the successful introduction of the town’s 2014 city centre policy and 2016 civil injunction allowing local elites greater control over far-right protests, but also came at a potential cost to democratic pluralism and tolerance. On a more positive note, learnings about public-order management by the Council seem to have been extended on every occasion – with anti-Islamic protest being moved further and further out of town at each subsequent march and demonstration. Moreover, the community has increasingly played a prevalent and integrated role in the Council’s public-order

approach to the group – demonstrating the resolve of local politicians and residents to get to grips with particularly thorny cohesion issues when anti-Islamic activists comes to demonstrate.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of political responses to demonstrations by the EDL and Britain First have been exclusionary. Sian Timoney, David Franks, Mahmood Hussain and Kelvin Hopkins MP all took robustly anti-racist, direct action approaches to anti-Islamic protest. This was based on an anti-racist conviction or previous experience of anti-racist activism – with some differences as to the means of achieving this. Meanwhile, Hazel Simmons, Gavin Shuker MP and Jaqui Barnett tried to take more institutional and legal approach in opposing the EDL and Britain First – resorting to changes in policy, preparations and counter demonstrations to facilitate a response to anti-Islamic groups. This is not to stress a fundamental difference, but a change in emphasis – ultimately uniting in an exclusionary action to restrict initially the EDL and then Britain First’s protest space in the town.

The most exclusionary measures *par excellence*, however, were the Council’s new town centre policy and Bedfordshire Police’s civil injunction. These achieved what other Council leaders and senior police officers from across the country had struggled to do – adopting a robust way of placing community rights over the rights of demonstrators by excluding anti-Islamic groups from mosques and a central civic space. In the end, however, serious questions can be raised about the legality of this response (such as the various bans and injunctions placed on the groups) and how it has affected local democracy in the town. For example, questions still can be asked whether the town centre policy infringes upon people’s right to peacefully assemble in the town. Moreover, it is unclear whether such measures when deployed in a draconian way could not simply be used to stifle democratic debate and dissent within Luton. The town centre policy therefore has initially nipped the EDL and Britain First problem at the bud. In doing so, however, it has opened up a raft of other normative, legal and moral questions about how far politicians should go in dealing with the noxious and deleterious politics of the EDL and Britain First. These issues will be picked up again in the conclusion to this book.

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## **4 Early responses to anti-Islamic protest**

### **Policy responses to the EDL and Britain First in Birmingham**

My initial reaction was that we shouldn't ban it but actually what became apparent was that they had no intention of cooperating with the police and . . . so by the time we had the second one I can say that my view had changed. . . . I thought to be perfectly honest we had a pretty valid case for calling for a ban.

Steve McCabe (2014), MP for Birmingham Selly Oak, on his policy change between the 2009 and 2011 EDL protests

I think the biggest challenge is that they identify the places they go to visit and if they think that Britain First have not done enough then that's the kind of thing that people would pick on and chase and attack. So . . . we [are] always reminded that we always plan for [such instances].

A senior Prevent co-ordinator (Birmingham 3 2017), on Britain First's April 2017 visit to Sparkbrook

#### **Introduction**

Birmingham has the infamous reputation of hosting some of the earliest and most disorderly anti-Islamic protests within the period of study. In particular, in the summer and autumn of 2009, the West Midlands city experienced pitched battles between police, EDL protesters and young Asian men. In the end, a total of 134 arrests were made over the course of three demonstrations as EDL protesters and counter protesters were caught up in running disorder across the city – placing it amongst one of the most serious instances of public disorder in Birmingham in recent times. The 2009 demonstrations were not, however, the end of anti-Islamic mobilisations in the city. Both the EDL and Britain First returned in 2011, 2013, 2014, 2016 and 2017, with increased numbers and a similar propensity for violent disorder. In 2013, for example, thirty-three arrests were made as EDL protesters broke through a police cordon in search of anti-fascist protesters. As one local Councillor (Zaffar 2015) commented: ‘that was probably the most violent one after 2009 that was the most difficult to police, because [there were] over 1,000 people.’

Unsurprisingly, Birmingham’s reputation for initial disorder by the EDL in 2009 has had a profound effect on how local elites have responded to anti-Islamic

incursions in the city. While earlier interventions may have underestimated the potential for disorder, later ones demonstrated a more robust reaction. For example, MP for Selly Oak, Steve McCabe, switched from being against banning the EDL's demonstrations in 2009 to petitioning for a ban in 2011. Moreover, MP for Perry Barr, Khalid Mahmood, opted in 2013 for more punitive levies to be imposed on demonstrators when criminal damage had been involved. In addition, a concerted consultative effort was made, post-2009, to engage with Birmingham's Muslim community. This was in order to avert one of the major unnamed risks involved when any anti-Islamic group comes to town: Muslim youth getting caught up in subsequent disorder – as had been the case at the EDL's September 2009 protest.

This chapter maps the arc of Birmingham's responses from August 2009 onwards. It tells the story of local politicians' journeys from flexibility to robustness when offering public-order prescriptions towards anti-Islamic protest. What we will find is that a central paradox exists within the Birmingham case, between a robust political response on the one hand, and a more low-profile policing response on the other. It will be argued that, in terms of successful responses to anti-Islamic protest, such a 'dual-track' approach does not necessarily end in counterproductive results and can work – as long as one doesn't interfere with the other. Reasons for why this is the case will then be spelt out in the conclusion of the chapter.

## **Context**

### **(a) *Deindustrialisation and diversity in Birmingham***

Birmingham rose to prominence in the eighteenth century based on its reputation as a place of intellectual enlightenment. During this period, the West Midlands city developed into a prominent centre for literary, musical, artistic and scientific activity – being commonly referred to as the centre of the 'Midlands Enlightenment' (BBC News 22nd April 2014). The city's booming economy attracted many people from outside – such was the scale that Birmingham's population more than doubled, from 23,600 in 1750 to 73,670 in 1801 (Cherry 1994: 33). Moreover, this period of creative activity cascaded down from the laboratory to the shop floor of factories – with engine-powered industry and the blast furnace being pioneered in the city.

In the nineteenth century, Birmingham was again at the forefront of industry in Britain. Named the 'city of a thousand trades,' a variety of small workshops sprang up in Birmingham during this period – making an assortment of specialised goods such as buttons, locks and ornaments as well as cutlery, nails and screws (Birmingham City Council n.d.a). The city's population also blossomed, with the arrival of Irish migrants seeing an almost ten-fold increase in population from 73,670 in 1801 to 840,000 in 1901 (*ibid.*). A number of civic buildings still stand testament to nineteenth century Birmingham to this day. These include Birmingham's Town Hall and Council House, the site of the city's main political functions and cultural events.

Like many of the other cities and towns included in this study, however, the twentieth century ushered in the decline of Birmingham's industrial sector and the rise of more service-oriented economy. This is salient, as trends of socio-economic transformation are of 'crucial importance' when explaining far-right support – marking out key ruptures where support for extremist movements are more likely (Betz 1994: 26). Largely left out of post-war national industrial strategies, then, the city's manufacturing sector shrank by 10% between 1951 and 1966, as the service sector grew by 24% in the same period (Cherry 1994: 157). Moreover, between 1971 and 1981, 200,000 jobs were lost in the local economy – mostly due to the declining manufacturing industry and the closure of the large British Leyland factory at its Longbridge site (*ibid.*: 161). Once a key hub of industrial innovation, the city's economy therefore became increasingly geared towards finance, public administration, education and health services (NOMIS 2016). A vestige of Birmingham's industrial past, Jaguar-Land Rover's Solihull plant is still one of the largest local employers (Birmingham City Council n.d.b).

Such a process of deindustrialisation has hit parts of Birmingham particularly hard. Inequality is still a big issue in the city. For example, unemployment in Birmingham has been around the highest in the UK – with a rate of 14.4% being double the national average (Savvas 24th October 2013). Moreover, nearly 40% of people in Birmingham live in areas which are classified as amongst the 10% most deprived in the country (Birmingham City Council December 2015). In addition, in Aston and Washwood Heath wards, unemployment is well above the national average – with 30% of those who are of an economically active age being out of work (Savvas 24th October 2013). Meanwhile, infant mortality is nearly double the national average (LGInform 2015) and childhood poverty is amongst the highest in the UK (Elkes 7th April 2017). This contrasts with areas like Edgbaston, Sutton Coldfield and Solihull, where properties can fetch up to £1.2 million and unemployment remains firmly below the city's average (Cannon 27th August 2014).

Like many large cities elsewhere in the UK, Birmingham also has a storied history of migration. Starting in the mid-nineteenth century, Irish migrants came to the West Midlands city to seek refuge from the 1845–1849 potato famine and settled in the Digbeth area of Birmingham. After World War II, many migrants from the Caribbean and Asia joined this first cohort after the passage of the 1948 British Nationality Act. Most migrants from the Indian sub-continent and from the West Indies came to earn a decent wage – something that was further facilitated by overseas worker schemes conducted during the period (Birmingham City Council n.d.c). The final wave of migration came in the 1980s and 2000s from as far afield as Kosovo and Somalia – with a majority fleeing from either 'ethnic cleansing' or civil war.

Birmingham's storied history of migration, however, has seen it flourish into a multicultural and diverse city. Birmingham's waves of migration mean that the city now comprises ten different people groups with 20,000 individuals making up each category respectively (Jivraj and Simpson 2015: 54), with 108 languages are spoken in the city's schools (Carter 24th October 2013), and 22% of the city's

population being foreign born (Birmingham City Council 18th March 2015). Moreover, the 2011 census found that 26% of Birmingham residents come from Pakistani, Indian, Bangladeshi or Afro-Caribbean backgrounds – with citizens from minority backgrounds being in the majority in six out of forty wards (ONS Census Data March 2011). In terms of religion, Christianity boasts the most adherents with 46.1% of residents subscribing to the faith (Birmingham City Council 18th March 2015). However, Islam is not far behind, with 21.8% of Birmingham's population labelling themselves as 'Muslim' in 2011. Moreover, this has seen a recent increase – with an addition of 50% arriving since the 2001 Census figures.

### **(b) Rioting in Birmingham**

Such levels of diversity have not been without their challenges, however. During the 1980s, the 'intense' and 'arbitrary' stop-and-search practices of West Midlands Police created large levels of animosity between the constabulary and ethnic minorities in the city (Waddington 1992: 90). This boiled over in 1981 and 1985, with two major riots occurring in the Handsworth area of the city. Ironically, the first of these riots came in the summer of 1981 and was sparked when a local police officer tried to quell fears about a National Front demonstration. It also came in reaction to earlier riots in the Brixton area of London that had been around the same issue of racial profiling (*ibid.*: 90). In the end, the ensuing disturbances led to 121 arrests and forty police officers injured – with considerable damage to property as a result. Going forward, a second riot was sparked in the same area of Birmingham four years later. Disorder erupted after a young black man became involved in an argument over a parking ticket with a police officer (Connell 10th August 2011). In the end, the ensuing riot saw two men killed and thirty-five injured – with forty-five shops either set alight or looted in the process (Birmingham Mail 14th July 2011).

While the disturbances of the 1980s centred on poor police-minority relations, further rioting in the 2000s added a more 'racial' dimension to disorder in Birmingham. In 2005, for example, so-called race riots erupted between residents of British Afro-Caribbean and Asian origins as rumours of an alleged rape circulated in the Lozells and Handsworth areas of the city (Muir and Butt 24th October 2005). As a result of that October's violent disorder, two young men died and thirty-five individuals were hospitalised. Moreover, riots returned to Birmingham seven years later. In 2011, and in 'copycat' incidences to the London riots, violent disorder and looting erupted in the Winson Green area of the city. The disturbances took a negative turn when, in a replay of 2005, three Asian men were hit and killed by a car of looters in what was suspected to be racially motivated attack (Butt and Wainwright 10th August 2011).

In some sense, the 2005 and 2011 riots shouldn't have happened. These more recent episodes came amidst renewed efforts by the local Council to promote more harmonious community relations in the city. In 2001, for example, 'Be Birmingham' was launched to bring together businesses, community and voluntary organisations, faith communities and the public sector to improve quality of life in

Birmingham (Be Birmingham 2015a). This strategic partnership brought together representatives from all majority and minority ethnic communities in Birmingham, involving them in dictating future priorities and commitments for the city. For example, the partnership's 'Birmingham Compact' provided a commitment to 'advocate on behalf of all sections of [Birmingham's] community' (Be Birmingham 2015b). In terms of activities, 'Being Birmingham' held regular 'community summits.' Ironically, its most recent one, in 2009, was centred on the notion of community cohesion in the city (Be Birmingham 28th January 2015).

Birmingham's history of rioting, as well as its large resident Muslim population, therefore provides crucial context for the presence of anti-Islamic protest in the West Midlands city from 2009 to 2018. The former was certainly in the minds of elites when the EDL visited the city for the fourth time in October 2014. As Councillor for Lozells and Handsworth ward, Waseem Zaffar (2015), comments: 'Community relations don't just suffer for that day, they suffer for a long time and picking up the pieces and building community relations is not easy.' When anti-Islamic protest arrived in Birmingham, then, history of rioting plays a formative role in the city's response. As Zaffar (2015), a community worker in 2005, adds: '[In Birmingham], we prevent any sort of violence or division at its earliest stage to prevent any long term problems' (*ibid.*).

### **(c) Islamist and right-wing extremism in Birmingham**

In addition to rioting, Birmingham's recent brushes with Islamist and right-wing extremism have also been indicative of the EDL and Britain First's presence. Turning to the former, Islamist extremism has been a key problem in Birmingham. In January 2008, Parviz Khan, a charity worker from Birmingham who was described as a 'fanatic,' was given a life sentence for plotting to behead a British Muslim soldier (BBC News 29th January 2009). Moreover, in June 2010, *The Guardian* newspaper reported that anti-terror surveillance cameras were installed in the Washwood Heath and Sparkbrook areas of Birmingham to provide surveillance on 'extremist' Muslim residents (Lewis 4th June 2010). Finally, and in direct provocation to the UK far right, in April 2013, five Muslim men from Birmingham pleaded guilty to planning a bomb attack on an EDL rally in Dewsbury during the previous summer (BBC News 30th April 2013). Unfortunately for the perpetrators, their plot was foiled, however, when police found the car they were travelling in was uninsured.

Unlike Islamist extremism, prior to the EDL and Britain First, there have been isolated – but no large-scale – mobilisations by the far-right extremists in Birmingham. In April 1968, for example, Enoch Powell's infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech was delivered not too far from the West Midlands city in neighbouring Wolverhampton; this set the tone for subsequent anti-minority protest in the city and continues to be a source of inspiration for anti-migrant sentiment to this day. Moreover, in 1977, the National Front conducted a particularly violent rally in Birmingham (BBC News 13th August 2005). More recently, the British National Party contested a number of local Council and Parliamentary seats in Birmingham

during the 2000s. In 2004, for example, the party contested twenty-four seats and only won one in Birmingham (HC Library Research Paper 04/49 2004). Moreover, in 2006, the BNP contested a further 40 seats without returning a single candidate to the City Council (Local Elections Archive Project May 2006). Turning to Parliamentary contests, the party never exceeded the National Front's previous by-election best (of 5.73%) – keeping its deposit<sup>1</sup> at its first electoral contest there in 1997.

## **Part I: EDL demonstrations in Birmingham**

### **(a) Birmingham's first EDL demonstrations (4th July, 8th August and 5th September 2009)**

Part of the EDL's 'branching out' period, the group's early protests in the city formed the focus of national media attention due to the highly disorderly and disruptive nature of the protests. In a 4th July 2009 demonstration by the EDL-affiliated group 'Casuals United,' for example, riot police held one hundred of the group's supporters back as they confronted local Asian youths (Sunday Mercury 19th July 2009) while in an 8th August demonstration violent clashes broke out between the UAF and EDL (Booth & Travis 9th August 2009). Finally, in the EDL's 5th September 2009 demonstration, 200 EDL supporters were caught up in disorder and the day again descended into running battles between protesters and police – this time in the Cathedral area of the city (Booth 6th September 2009). For the first time, this initial and intensive wave of EDL protest therefore cemented in local (and national) elites' minds the public-order and community cohesion challenge that the EDL (and contemporary far-right groups more generally) could pose to the city.

#### *(i) Wider preparations and political responses*

In the case of the 2009 demonstrations, the responses of Birmingham political elites were neatly divided between those in favour of banning the EDL and those against banning the group from marching. This was perhaps a sign of the confusion about how to deal with the group. With little precedent to go on apart from rioting in Handsworth and Lozells four years earlier, local politicians were scrambling for places to draw lessons from in order to construct a considered response to the EDL. In any event, the 2009 demonstrations played a key mental marker for political and policing elites alike as something to avoid when dealing with future EDL mobilisations. As MP for Birmingham Selly Oak, Steve McCabe (2014), recollects: 'they had no intention of having a peaceful protest. Their complete unwillingness to cooperate with the police [was] a major factor in that.'

The first politician to campaign in favour of a ban in 2009 was Khalid Mahmood, MP for Birmingham's Perry Barr constituency. After the EDL's first demonstration in July 2009, he urged the police to block the EDL's forthcoming August event. In a comment to the *Birmingham Mail*, Mahmood suggested that the EDL

only had ‘sinister intentions’ for Birmingham – they wished nothing more than ‘to promote violence on [Birmingham’s] streets’ (Sunday Mercury 19th July 2009). He also suggested that the cost to business and public safety were too great to let another EDL demonstration go ahead (Mahmood 2015). Moreover, after the August 2009 protest, Mahmood suggested that there should be a serious look going forward at interventions that could be used to reduce tensions between the EDL and UAF. In an interview with *The Guardian*, he commented that: ‘I think the groups ought to know better and certainly if there was going to be rallies by both these groups at the same time it would always lead to this sort of confrontation’ (Booth and Travis 9th August 2009).

Mahmood was not alone in his efforts to get the EDL’s marches banned from Birmingham. After the July 2009 demonstration, he, along with other local Respect and Labour politicians, called on the West Midlands Police to prohibit the EDL from marching at the final September 2009 demonstration. This was based on the violence experienced at the EDL’s 8th August protest (Birmingham Respect 23rd August 2009). This time they applied successfully, with the then Home Secretary, Alan Johnson, ordering a ban on demonstrations inside the Bull Ring area of the city. In particular, Mahmood also advocated moving EDL demonstrations outside of the city centre completely – suggesting that this would eliminate the public-order and public safety cost of the EDL’s presence (*ibid.*). He was also highly critical of the treatment of local residents at the time of the 2009 protests – suggesting that the rights of demonstrators (who he names as ‘perpetrators’) were put above the rights of local residents (who he names as ‘victims’) (Mahmood 2015).

Another strident anti-EDL campaigner at the time of the 2009 Birmingham demonstrations was Salma Yaqoob, Councillor for Sparkbrook ward and national leader of Respect. In the run up to the EDL’s September 2009 demonstration, Yaqoob too called on the EDL to be banned and complained at the police’s reticence on the issue (Birmingham Mail 22nd August 2009). Moreover, on the day of the 5th September demonstration, Yaqoob attended and spoke at the UAF counter rally in the city (Unite Against Fascism 8th October 2009). Yaqoob’s interventions weren’t without personal cost, however. As a result of her campaigning, she started to receive death threats and a man was later charged in August of that year (Birmingham Mail 16th August 2009).

Retracing our steps, it wasn’t, however, until after the EDL’s August 2009 demonstration that another Birmingham Member of Parliament decided to respond to the EDL’s presence. In contrast to Khalid Mahmood and other local politicians, MP for Selly Oak, Steve McCabe, publicly opposed banning the EDL’s August 2009 demonstration in the city. Concerned at approaching the group from a dogmatic angle, McCabe reasoned that ‘we can’t go around banning things because we don’t like them or because of the threat of a reaction’ (Birmingham Mail 26th August 2009). Moreover, he had concerns about the security risks and potential infringement of protester rights that a ban may have affected. For example, he was worried that a ban would have risked ‘driving [the EDL] underground and making them more dangerous’ as well as infringing the group’s freedom of speech (McCabe 2014). In an interview with the author, he suggests that his opinion was

not uncommon at the time – with ‘a broad spectrum’ of his colleagues leaning – at least privately – the same way (*ibid.*).

Moving down from the Parliamentary to the local authority level, local Councillors also displayed divisions between pro- and anti-ban camps, this time when the EDL came on its final visit in September 2009. Clashes came at the very top of the City Council when Alan Rudge, then Cabinet Member for Equalities and Community Cohesion, disagreed with Deputy Council Leader, Paul Tilsley, about how to best deal with the EDL’s presence. Rudge wished to hold off banning the group’s demonstration, while Tilsley wanted the EDL’s march to be stopped by the police due to the ‘inflammatory’ nature of the group’s presence as well as its impact on commerce, community relations and Council budgets (Birmingham Post 28th August 2009). In a bizarre turn of events, this political conflict wasn’t resolved and both made their separate consultations with West Midlands Police over what actions to take next – frustrating and complicating efforts by the local constabulary to police the protest.

It was no surprise then when, on 5th September, the EDL’s last 2009 demonstration in Birmingham turned out to be one of the most riotous that year. Against the advice of senior Birmingham police officers and politicians, Dr Muhammed Naseem, the head of Birmingham’s Central Mosque, urged the city’s Muslim community to confront the EDL (The Daily Mail 7th September 2009). In the end, ninety demonstrators were arrested as the EDL, anti-fascist counter protesters and Muslim youth confronted each other on the streets around Birmingham New Street train station (*ibid.*). In the aftermath of the final September 2009 EDL protest, Birmingham City Council praised the police operation (planned four weeks in advance) for ‘successfully’ managing the event. Not all were, however, happy with attempts by West Midlands Police to quell disorder in 2009. Khalid Mahmood MP, for example, suggested that the (September) demonstration and its management was a ‘complete mess’ – complaining that insufficient preparations had been undertaken by the police for the EDL’s return (Booth 6th September 2009). Such pointed criticisms and the spectre of 2009 stimulated a Birmingham-led rethinking about how the police should respond to the EDL nationally. For example, a week after the September protest, West Midlands Police convened a summit with other senior police officers from the Greater Manchester, Bedfordshire and Metropolitan police to ‘discuss the actions of the EDL’ and ‘how best to deal with the politics of division’ generated by the group (Wilson 17th September 2009).

Moreover, Assistant Chief Constable Sharon Rowe was asked to chair a cross-constabulary group to collect intelligence about EDL activists (BBC Newsnight 12th October 2009a) – with officers assigned as ‘spotters’ at a subsequent Manchester demonstration to record and monitor EDL activists (BBC Newsnight 12th October 2009b). Furthermore, one of the difficulties identified by police coming out of the Birmingham summit of policing the EDL’s demonstrations was that ‘much of the planning was carried out over social networking sites’ (BBC News 17th September 2009). One of the innovations that the West Midlands Police took on board then was to use Twitter and Facebook in policing EDL protest – involving ‘scotch[ing] wild rumours or shar[ing] updates on how they were keeping the peace,’ this was

then rolled out and became a key feature of policing EDL protest across the country (Birmingham Mail 3rd November 2011).

*(ii) Conclusion*

The 2009 EDL protests in Birmingham came as a shock to both political and policing elites. It firmly divided local politicians, with some advocating a ban on the group demonstrating while others suggested that a ban wasn't an appropriate way of dealing with the group. In terms of policing, confrontation between the EDL and local youths – as well as the EDL and local police officers – seemed to provide a key catalyst for disorder on all three occasions. Another contributory factor was that the police had very little experience of the EDL and the chaos that they could generate at this time. As the Chief Constable of West Midlands Police, Chris Sims, commented: the EDL were 'a new national phenomenon' that they had not had to deal with before (Wilson 17th September 2009).

Lessons about political unity and the potential for disorder were therefore brought forward after 2009 – with a more consensual policing approach the result. The 2009 conflagrations also acted as a key mental marker for local politicians and police when responding to anti-Islamic protest – with a number of local MPs (Steve McCabe and Khalid Mahmood) and Councillors (Waseem Zaffar and Josh Jones) referring to the events unprompted when interviewed as something they were keen to avoid. Moreover, the September 2009 protest also provided the impetus for better engagement with Birmingham's Muslim communities at subsequent demonstrations – something that was fostered by the Council and local politicians as part of a more serious community engagement strategy going forward.

***(b) Birmingham's second major EDL demonstration  
(17th October 2011)***

Possibly encouraged by their previous ability to provoke disorder, anti-Islamic protesters returned to Birmingham in October 2011. The motive for the EDL's return this time was, however, far more sinister. According to intelligence gathered by West Midlands Police, the group wished to 'attack' Birmingham's Muslim Community (West Midlands Police, September 2011). In the end, however, the EDL's wishes were not realised; about 500 EDL protesters turned out for a rain-soaked demonstration in which only five arrests were made (Sunday Mercury 30th October 2011). In a distinct change to two years previous, there were no public-order incidences related to the local Asian community. In an effort to avoid previous conflagrations, police agreed to move the EDL from Victoria Square to the less prominent Centenary Square – based on the belief held by some Councillors that 'we shouldn't be accommodating them' (BBC News 26th October 2011). Crucially, police also tried to strike a more consultative relationship with protesters in 2011 – engaging in a 'great deal' of discussion with event organisers (Sunday Mercury 30th October 2011). Mainly as a result of the change in police

tactics and partially to do with the poor weather, then, the 2011 protest event came in stark contrast to the three previous demonstrations in 2009 – with a largely peaceful atmosphere on the day of the protest. As EDL expert Joel Busher notes, the event was largely looked upon within the EDL as being a ‘resounding failure’ (Busher 2015: 124).

(i) *Wider preparations*

Building on the 2009 experience, the October 2011 protest saw a dramatic change in how the police and local Council prepared for anti-Islamic protest in the city. First, and marking a broader shift in national policing approaches, instead of allowing protesters and counter protesters to interact with each other, they were kept separate – with the UAF located at the Council House and the EDL at the end of Broad Street around Centenary Square. As Deputy Leader of Birmingham City Council, Paul Tilsley, comments: ‘[in 2011] we stood a chance because of the road system and access [allowed us] to keep them apart. . . I think that was reasonably successful in separating them and I don’t think there was a resultant conflagration as there was in the earlier demonstration[s]’ (Tilsley 2015).

Second, West Midlands Police engaged in wider dialogue with the protest groups themselves. For example, after talking with the EDL and the UAF, it was decided that employing stewards for the groups was needed in order to curtail the amount of disorder and to act as a link between the protest groups and police. Third, police tried to ‘normalise’ the day’s protest event. For example, West Midlands Police allowed a number of community events to go ahead in and around the city centre and encouraged ‘people to go about their normal business’ (Tyler 29th October 2011). In a letter to *The Guardian*, Assistant Chief Constable Marcus Beale commented that ‘the [2011] event was ultimately successful’ – with only a couple of road closures and the deferral of a Poppy Appeal baring signs of disruption on the day (Beale 8th November 2011).

In addition, and crucially, there was also a concerted effort by the Council’s Equalities, Community Safety and Cohesion department to prevent young Muslim men from getting caught up in disorder. This took its learning directly from the September 2009 experience. For example, and as one Birmingham City Council official recounts, ‘trusted community contacts,’ such as imams, community leaders and community elders, sent out a robust message prior to the protest; they told young people to ‘stay away’ from the city centre (Birmingham 1 2015). This was not, however, prescriptive advice, and was balanced with ‘not completely avoiding the city centre if it is part of their day to day travel and shopping’ (*ibid.*). Moreover, this pro-avoidance message was part of a broader rethink (post-2009) of ‘how we work with our young people, how we work with our Mosques, how we work with our wider faith groups, how we maintain calm in the city’ (*ibid.*). Crucially, in 2011, scenes of Asian youths brawling with far-right protestors were not repeated – a major success for community relations and community activists in Birmingham.

*(ii) Political responses*

Similarly, the 2011 demonstration saw a step change in the robustness of anti-far-right interventions by local elites. MP for Selly Oak, Steve McCabe, previously a prominent advocate of not banning the EDL, reversed his position on the issue. In the run up to the October 2011 demonstration, McCabe came out in support of the bid by Birmingham City Council and West Midlands Police for a ban – describing the EDL as a ‘a rag bag of extremism looking to cause trouble’ (Birmingham Mail 21st October 2011). When questioned how this about-face occurred, McCabe stated that there were two important considerations behind this. The first was evidence from previous demonstrations that the EDL had ‘no intention of having a peaceful protest’ or cooperating with police (McCabe 2014). The second was due to the cost to police budgets and local commerce of the city. As McCabe suggests: ‘I was more concerned by the likely impact on Birmingham on traders lost trade [and the] cost to the retail sector’ (*ibid.*). Labour Councillor for Lozells and East Handsworth, Waseem Zaffar, also called upon the Home Secretary to ban the march (Birmingham Mail 21st October 2011), while he also later called for a ban to be placed on the group itself (Birmingham Mail 11th November 2011). This was not because Zaffar was against freedom of speech in principle but, like McCabe, was concerned about the violent activity of the group. As Zaffar (2015) notes: ‘Standing on top of bus shelters throwing missiles at police officers is not freedom of speech.’

The 2011, demonstration also saw a step change in the volume of responses against anti-Islamic protest in the city. This was mainly because of the high-profile nature of the disorder that happened two years previous that had stoked awareness of the issue. For example, John Hemming, MP for Birmingham Yardley, had mounted frequent Parliamentary protests against the EDL in the intervening period and in the lead up to the 2011 demonstration. He had either co-sponsored or signed three Parliamentary Early Day Motions that suggested that the EDL should have been banned from demonstrating in Leicester, Middlesbrough and nearby Dudley (HC EDM 2182: 758, 1920).

Moreover, as early as February 2011, Khalid Mahmood again called for a march ban on EDL protester and petitioned for extra resources if a ban was not secured – with cuts in police budgets and policing provision for his local community provided as key reasons for his stance (Tyler 8th February 2011). In addition, Waseem Zaffar wrote to the Home Secretary, City Council and West Midlands Police in advance of 2011 in order to petition for a ban and to get the protest site on the 2011 demonstration moved from Victoria square to Centenary square – citing the violence of 2009 as a key concern in such a popularly used and central location of Birmingham (Zaffar 10th October 2011).

*(iii) Conclusion*

The 2011 EDL demonstration in Birmingham came in distinct contrast to the group’s 2009 mobilisations – posing wider lessons about how to deal with

far-right protest. This time, police adopted a more consultative approach to the group's presence. The result was a more consensual style of policing, which de-escalated the confrontational dynamic that the EDL and other anti-Islamic groups are likely to engage in. Moreover, the Council also became more innovative in 2011 – taking a more proactive approach to its liaisons with the Muslim community before the day of the October protest. This involved persuading key religious leaders and community elders to help stop the re-occurrence of scenes at the September 2009 protests. Whether it is acceptable for the Council to suggest that a certain minority population 'stay away' from the city centre, of course, is problematic, but it certainly reduced potential for conflagration in 2011. In contrast to the policing response, political elites *actually* increased the robustness and the exclusionary tone of their interventions in 2011. This would set a trend for the future far-right demonstrations, with hard exclusionary political responses being matched by policing consultation and inclusion going forward – past the EDL and on to Britain First.

### **(c) Birmingham's third major EDL demonstration (20th July 2013)**

With a harder exclusivist stance towards far-right protest and lessons learnt from 2009, Birmingham had a strong basis from which to go forward when the EDL announced its intention to demonstrate a fifth time in July 2013. This time the EDL came to the West Midlands city to protest at the dismantling of anti-terror surveillance cameras in the Sparkbrook and Washwood Heath areas of Birmingham (BBC News 20th July 2013). Unfortunately, the EDL's 2013 protest also saw the return of violent disorder to Birmingham's streets. Thirty-three of the EDL's 1,000 protesters were arrested after serious clashes between the group and police at the main protest site (Lloyd 20th July 2013). One police officer had to be treated for a concussion, and a number of protesters sustained head injuries as smoke bombs, cobblestones and bottles rained down during the protest (*ibid.*).

The immediate context was, however, particularly instructive in terms of disorder: it was the first Birmingham demonstration after five local men were convicted of planning the bombing of the anti-Islamic group at a march in Dewsbury the previous year. Moreover, it was also scheduled amid heightened community tensions – arriving in the immediate aftermath of attacks by a Ukrainian student on three Birmingham mosques and the murder of an elderly Muslim man (BBC News 25th October 2013). Finally, it also came during a wider peak in anti-Muslim sentiment and activism sparked by the Woolwich terror attacks – with renewed support for anti-Islam demonstrations across the UK (Feldman and Littler July 2014). Despite elite learning, then, prior events set the tone and atmosphere for the EDL's 20th July protest.

#### *(i) Wider preparations*

Disorder in the case of 2013 was still odd, however. Even set against such a formidable backdrop, a 'great deal of time, effort and thought' had been dedicated to the

EDL's July 2013 protest (Lloyd 20th July 2013). In an interview before the day's events, Assistant Chief Constable, Sharon Rowe commented that the West Midlands Police operation was the biggest the force had ever put in place – with up to 1,000 officers drafted in for the day's events (BBC News 25th October 2013). In addition, it even showed broad continuity with the 2011 approach – as police officers patrolled key communities within the city to reassure residents and head off any disorder that might have headed towards the main protest site. In the end, Rowe even considered the police's operation as 'successful' – with most people being able to 'go about their daily business' and the day 'largely' passing off without serious incident (Lloyd 20th July 2013).

One explanation for the wider conflagration on the day of the 2013 demonstration could, however, have been a repeat instance of senior police officers being distracted by the political debate before the event. A lot of time was taken up in 2013 by the (arguably) tangential debate of policing costs for successive anti-Islamic protests during a time of austerity and police cuts. For example, the day before the 2013 wave of EDL protests, Police and Crime Commissioner for West Midlands Police, Bob Jones, publically expressed 'considerable concern' about the 'significant cost and strain on our already stretched budgets' (Talwar 19th July 2013). Moreover, MP for Perry Barr, Khalid Mahmood, also weighed in on the conversation – suggesting that significant fines should be imposed on those involved in crime during these demonstrations (*ibid.*). This cannot, however, fully explain the violent disorder on the day of the protest, and therefore may be down to both the (previously noted) 'hyped-up' atmosphere around the 2013 demonstration and the heightened police presence decided on by Sharon Rowe and her colleagues.

Turning to other preparations, as far as the Birmingham City Council was concerned, there was heightened engagement with Birmingham's Asian community. This was a continuation of the work established in 2011. In 2013, for example, local officials engaged in the city's Prevent programme used work from their 'Outstanding Neighbourhoods' project and a reference group of community contacts to prepare two weeks in advance of the demonstration. Like in 2011, the aim of this was to circulate the message that people from these communities should not be in the city centre when the demonstration was taking place (Zaffar 2015). In the end, the Council official responsible was pleased with the overall level of community engagement in 2013 – suggesting that 'having an early conversation with communities help[ed]' (Birmingham 1 2015).

In reality, however, things weren't so smooth sailing. On the day of the 2013 demonstration, there was a major incident between Asian youths and officers from nearby Warwickshire Police that almost ended in a breach of the peace. Young men reacted adversely to the mass police presence and to being filmed as part of the police's surveillance. As Councillor Waseem Zaffar, who witnessed the events and raised it at the official policing debrief, commented: 'that was totally mismanaged and in the end the police apologised because you know it was just ethnic profiling. If you were of ethnic minority origin you were being pictured before you could leave . . . that was creating more tension' (Zaffar 2015). This was

picked up and taken forward by West Midlands Police, who mobilised a less high-profile response when the EDL returned in 2014, and at subsequent Britain First demonstrations. It does, however, show how rowing back on previous successful adaptations to far-right protest can see a resurgence of disorder.

### *(ii) Political responses*

As had now come to be expected, local politicians mounted hard, exclusionary campaigns towards the presence of anti-Islamic protest in 2013. In a letter to the *Birmingham Mail* three days before the 20th July protest, leaders at the City Council – as well as key religious organisations – stated that the EDL's presence would not ‘create divisions and you will not destroy our unity’ (Hallam 17th July 2013). Moreover, Birmingham’s Labour party also issued a similarly exclusionary statement ahead of the EDL’s return in July 2013 – stating that they ‘strongly oppose[d]’ the EDL’s forthcoming demonstration, and that: ‘There is no place in our city for messages of hate. There is no place for intolerance and there is no place for violence or extremism of any kind’ (Unite Against Fascism 17th July 2013). This came in contrast to the Council’s public statements around the EDL’s 2013 protest. In particular, Councillor John Cotton, Cabinet Member for Social Cohesion and Equalities, took a more neutral line – asking individuals to ‘go about their normal business’ and ‘not allow the protest to undermine . . . tolerance, peace and understanding’ in the West Midlands city (Hallam 17th July 2013).

In addition to these harder and more exclusivist public statements, 2013 also spelt the start of publically recorded incidents of Birmingham Councillors taking to the streets *en masse*. Labour Councillor’s Josh Jones and Miriam Khan joined the anti-fascist collective, Unite Against Fascism’s ‘Unity’ event in Chamberlain Square, along with five other Councillors. When asked about their presence at the protest, Khan – a Councillor for the Washwood Heath ward – stated that: ‘it was important to have a demonstration against the EDL to show that people in Birmingham don’t tolerate hate’ (Ensor 23rd July 2013). Moreover, Jones insisted that it was imperative to oppose anti-Islamic protest on the streets – stating that ‘if we don’t stop [the] fascists they’ll attack everyone’ (*ibid.*). He saw it as his ‘duty’ as a Councillor ‘to stand shoulder to shoulder with the people in [his] community that [were] being victimised and persecuted’ by the EDL (Jones 2015). In a separate statement to the press, Councillor for Lozells and Handsworth ward, Waseem Zaffar – who also attended the counter demonstration – stated that:

We are obviously disappointed that the EDL chose Birmingham to host this demonstration. Birmingham doesn’t really need this sort of attention. . . . My message to the EDL would be to stay away from Birmingham – your message of hate divides communities and is not welcome.

(The Huffington Post 20th July 2013)

Other signs of harder interventions in 2013 were proposals on policing costs as a result of the demonstration being one of the most expensive policing operations

in the history of West Midlands Police. As one might expect, this provoked robust reactions from a number of local elites angry at the cost to the public purse. For example, Waseem Zaffar asked police whether they would approach the EDL for a contribution towards funds (as had been the case at other large public-order events); this notion was, however, rejected. Moreover, MP for Perry Barr, Khalid Mahmood, condemned the £1 million spent on the protest – suggesting that it would have been ‘better spent on the community on crime-fighting initiatives’ (Tyler 2nd August 2013). In addition, Mahmood suggested that those found responsible for criminal damage to the city and businesses should be fined. When quizzed about the democratic impact of fining demonstrators, Mahmood (2015) suggests that it wouldn’t infringe on people’s freedom of speech and assembly but would merely ‘make [demonstrators] directly responsible for their actions.’ He envisaged such proposals in the context of redressing the balance from giving ‘licence’ to anti-Islamic groups like to EDL to freely demonstrate and restore the emphasis on ‘the vast majority of victims’ who he saw as the residents in Birmingham (*ibid.*).

### *(iii) Conclusion*

The EDL’s 2013 protest saw the return of wide-scale disorder to Birmingham’s streets. This came as slightly peculiar for a city that had: a) been increasingly exclusionary in its dealings with the EDL, and b) had made greatnroads into improving its policing of EDL demonstrations. The mass disorder on the day of the 2013 EDL demonstration then came as a shock to local politicians and police, as the local Council had all but eliminated the risk associated with members of the Muslim community being provoked by the EDL’s presence. This disorder may have not been totally surprising, however. For example, the return of a more high-profile policing presence in 2013 was shown to have had a considerable influence on members of the Asian community at the day’s event. Moreover, the heightening of tensions posed by the Woolwich terror attacks and a failed anti-EDL bomb plot would have added reasons for the EDL to be involved in potential disorder. However, it also goes to prove how adopting and consistently building on lessons from previous anti-Islamic protest is highly important when addressing this public-order issue.

### ***(d) Birmingham’s fourth major EDL demonstration (10th October 2014)***

Shaken by its experiences in 2013, Birmingham politicians retrenched their hard, exclusionary stance towards anti-Islamic protest when the EDL returned in the autumn of 2014. Now a leaderless organisation, the EDL was arguably a smaller public-order ‘threat’ in 2014 – not able to draw on nearly as many activists as compared to the years previous. For example, only an estimated 500 demonstrators turned out at the protest. The group, however, should have arguably been able to mobilise more – given the fortuitous context surrounding the demonstration.

In 2014, for example, the so-called Trojan Horse incidents' of 'radical Islam' in Birmingham schools made national headlines (Lloyd and Buckley 11th October 2014). In the end, however, the protest was neither sizeable, nor massive, with a contingent of only ten EDL demonstrators being arrested on the day of the demonstration. These came as a result of EDL protesters surging towards anti-fascists and trying to storm the UAF's stage in Chamberlain Square (*ibid.*). Fortunately, the scenes of the late 2009 and July 2013 were not, however, repeated – with calm prevailing at the EDL's October 2014 Birmingham protest.

*(i) Wider preparations*

Learning from the confrontational approach adopted in 2013 and the diminished threat posed by the EDL, police took a more low-key and consultative approach towards the protest in 2014. In the weeks leading up to the demonstration, officers used meetings with organisers, Councillors, business leaders, community representatives and other local stakeholders to shape their operations (*ibid.*). As one Councillor comments: there was 'better communication with everyone involved' and 'better coordination' between demonstrators, police and the local community in 2014 (Birmingham 2 2015). Moreover, on the day of the demonstration itself, police brought forward lessons from the previously described 2013 'Warwickshire Police incident' and were able to strategically consign officers to discreet places around the city, only appearing as disorder arose (ITV News 11th October 2014). In addition, a unit of Police Liaison officers was also dispatched; this was to avoid misunderstandings within the local community as well as to provide a point of contact between demonstrators and senior police officers (*ibid.*).

In proportion to the threat posed by the (now leaderless) EDL, engagement with the local Muslim community was also fairly low-key in 2014. As one key Council official at the time suggests: 'We didn't have to utilise as much our community groups. I think now that if people were to see the EDL if they were come to Birmingham, they would see it [as] pointless in terms of coming into the city' (Birmingham 1 2015). Moreover, in 2014, the same person believed that the EDL 'as a focal point' had simply lost traction amongst Birmingham's Muslim community; they simply no longer saw the group as a 'threat' and chose to ignore the EDL's presence on the day of the 2014 demonstration (*ibid.*). This was a contrast to dramatic scenes in 2009 and was a deliberate learning from 2013, which found that a 'large police presence may actually lead to more trouble and concern' (*ibid.*).

*(ii) Political responses*

While the policing and community engagement measures in 2014 were fairly low-key, the nature of the political reaction to anti-Islamic protest was even harder in 2014 than it was in 2013. About ten days before the 2014 demonstration, Council leaders, the police and local religious leaders again signed a statement in which they made clear that the EDL was 'not welcome in Birmingham' (Birmingham City Council 10th October 2014). Paul Tilsley, Deputy Leader of Birmingham

City Council, posits that he signed the 2014 statement for much more practical reasons, however – suggesting that the successive presence of the EDL had been ‘negat[ing] years and years of marketing [the] city’ and was a continuing threat to public safety in the city centre (Tilsley 2015).

The rationale behind the statement was clear: to use ‘much more direct language’ and a ‘stronger line’ against the anti-Islamic EDL (McKay 2015). This was a conscious move, as previously the Council had been criticised by lay members for not coming out more immediately against the group in 2013 (*ibid.*). As Councillor James McKay, who had taken over from John Cotton as the Cabinet Member for Social Cohesion and Equalities, suggested: the ‘feedback from 2013 was that the City . . . was nowhere near strong enough on its messaging of the EDL protest and it was summed up in people saying: “you never said that the EDL are not welcome”’ (*ibid.*). In 2014, then, the Council was at pains to adopt a more robust and exclusionary public relations strategy when talking about the EDL’s presence in the city. In a distinct shift from the more neutral stance adopted by his predecessor, James McKay (still Cabinet Member for Social Cohesion, Equalities and Community Safety in 2014) took to the press to reinforce this robust exclusionary rhetoric – telling reporters that public safety was a top priority for the Council and suggesting that ‘we would prefer [the EDL] to stay away from Birmingham’ (Walsall Advertiser 11th October 2014).

Apart from these interventions, other political responses to the EDL’s October 2014 demonstration were fairly minimal. Between 2013 and 2014, John Hemming, MP for Yardley, kept up his previous practice of signing Early Day Motions against anti-Islamic protest – signing one against the presence of the EDL in Tower Hamlets in September 2013 (HC EDM 491). Moreover, a number of Birmingham MPs and Councillors signed a statement commissioned by UAF – stating that as signatories they ‘reject[ed] the attempt by the EDL to whip up racism and division in [the] city by trying to turn communities against each other’ (Gable 10th October 2014). A sign of the low-profile nature of the demonstration, no Members of Parliament took it up as a major campaigning issue – perhaps preferring to let the demonstration to run its course and to make as little an impact as possible.

Despite the diminution of public-facing statements in some quarters, however, there was still significant involvement by local politicians in the counter campaigns and rallies of 2014. For example, a number of Birmingham Councillors signed a statement by the UAF-organised anti-fascist collective ‘We Are Birmingham’ the day before the demonstration, which condemned the EDL’s decision to demonstrate, rejecting ‘the attempt by the EDL to whip up racism and division’ as well as the group’s ability to ‘turn communities against each other’ (*ibid.*). Moreover, on the day, Labour Councillors Claire Spencer, Josh Jones, Miriam Khan, Sharon Thompson and Waseem Zaffar all attended the Unite Against Fascism counter demonstration in Chamberlain Square – with Zaffar, Khan, Jones and Thompson giving speeches telling Birmingham residents to ignore the EDL, signalling their disgust at the group’s presence, and pleading for community cohesion to be maintained (*ibid.*).

### (iii) Conclusion

The EDL's final major Birmingham demonstration in October 2014 displayed again a contrast between a low-key policing response and a heightened (exclusionary) political response. An exemplar of this was the petition circulated by Council officials that took on far more explicit exclusionary language than in years previous – a deliberate learning from the more neutral Council-sponsored response to the 2013 EDL protest. In terms of events on the day itself, however, these came as a marked contrast to scenes of five years earlier with only ten arrests coming to pass as a result of minor public disorder. Partially to do with the diminution of the EDL, partially to do with the local authority's now well-rehearsed policing response to anti-Islamic protest, the 2014 demonstration appeared as a 'non-event' – with the city's Muslim community and MPs not responding to the group's presence. In the end, then, the EDL's 2014 demonstration was a rather inauspicious one for a group that had caused such havoc when they had originally came five years previous. In perhaps a sign of the times, the EDL barely made the local news headlines on the day of the protest.

## **Part II: Britain First demonstrations in Birmingham**

Unfortunately for local elites, anti-Islamic protest was given an added dimension both during and after the EDL's main period of activism. Taking place on 29th July 2014 outside Birmingham's Central Mosque (Figure 4.1), an initial 'flash' protest was organised by five Britain First activists planning on holding a 'No More Mosques' banner – demanding that the imam 'speak out against Muslim grooming gangs in the city' (Pitt 3rd August 2014). This came after an earlier visit to Vue cinema in Birmingham's Star City entertainment complex based on fictitious story about non-Muslims being banned from seeing films there (Pitt 2nd August 2014). Tellingly, none of Britain First's leadership attended these earlier protests.

The start of Britain First activism in Birmingham *proper*, therefore, came two years later; this time in the context of the Britain's referendum to either stay or leave the European Union. On 3rd September 2016, thirty Britain First activists appeared in the New Street area of Birmingham at the time of an anti-Brexit rally (Cartledge 3rd September 2016). On this occasion, both of the group's leaders, Paul Golding and Jayda Fransen, turned out to support the group's regional 'West Midland's Brigade.' Minor scuffles ensued as 20 police officers separated Britain First demonstrators from Socialist Workers Party activists (*ibid.*).

More significantly, Britain First came to Birmingham again in April 2017, this time to the Sparkbrook area of the city. Bearing similarities to its 'Christian Patrols' in other parts of the UK, a van containing Britain First activists dropped off members who subsequently walked through Sparkbrook High Street, carrying crosses, in the immediate aftermath of the 22nd March 2017 Westminster attacks (Richardson 12th April 2017). Before being pelted with eggs, the group managed to accost the owner of an Islamic bookshop – claiming that it was 'selling

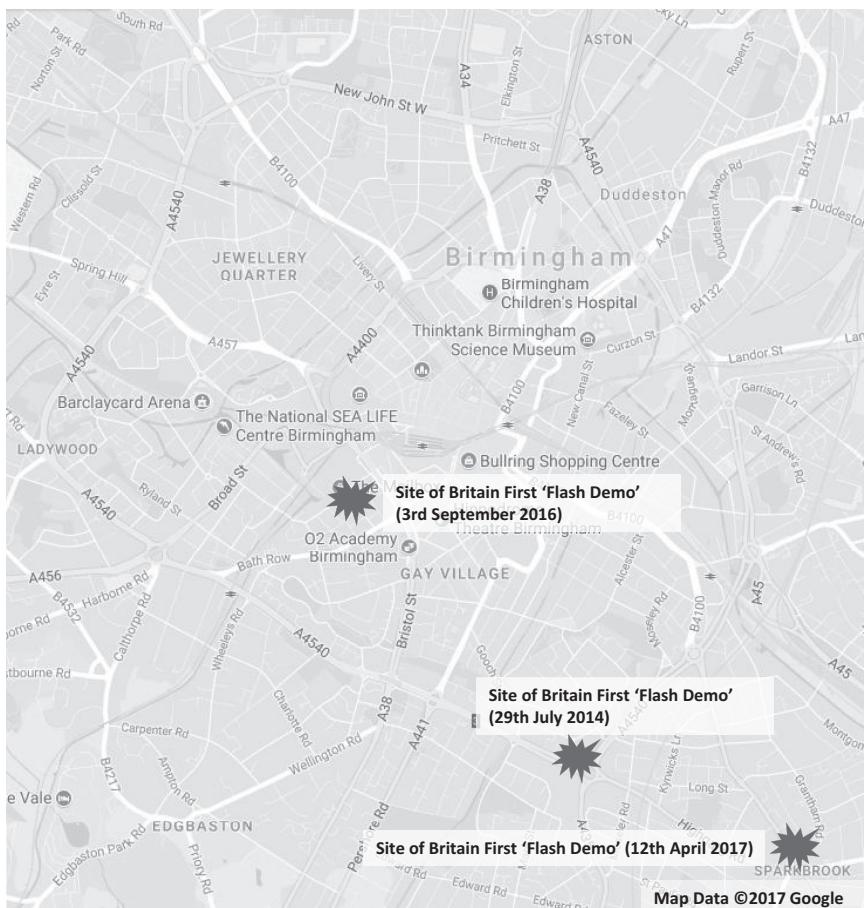


Figure 4.1 ‘Geographies of hate’: mobilisations by Britain First in Birmingham

extremist literature’ (Rodger 19th April 2017). Demonstrating how tabloid media can fan the flames of anti-Islamic activism, this was based on information contained within a *Daily Express* article that singled out the shop for selling books ‘promoting Islamic Jihad’ (Fielding 12th March 2017).

#### (a) Wider preparations

Unlike the EDL, Britain First’s more ad-hoc form of activism caught many local policymakers off-guard in 2016. Typical of a Saturday, many police officers were drafted to take care of other large public-order events – like football matches – when Britain First arrived in September 2016 (Birmingham 3 2017). This meant that ordinary officers were called to deal with Britain First as they turned up; thus,

negotiating with the group's activists about what they wanted to do and the amount of time they wished to spend in the New Street area. As one senior police officer makes clear, in this situation, 'We'll carry on doing our job and try to facilitate the protests where we can do and just try to keep normality . . . a lot of the time it's a short sharp hit in terms of media coverage, and then [they] move on' (*ibid.*).

Despite events nearly six months prior, Britain First's April 2017 visit to Sparkbrook also caught policymakers by surprise. As one local Prevent co-ordinator (Birmingham 1 2017) suggested: 'you know where you get out of a van for 30 seconds or a couple of minutes and you film [or] antagonise locals and then you quickly get back in the van and move away. And you give the police and any others very little time to plan anything.' In contrast to the fairly fraught scenes of Socialist Workers Party (SWP) activists facing off against Britain First in September 2016, the community and political response to Britain First's April 2017 visit was positive and proactive: 'the local elected members took ownership of the issue because it was on their patch: worked very closely with the police, gave reassurances to the local community, met the bookshop [owners], went across other bookshops in the area providing them with guidance and reassurance' (*ibid.*).

### ***(b) Political responses***

Despite this common element of surprise, political responses to both incursions by Britain First actually showed great contrast in 2016 and 2017. While the September 2016 'flash demo' by the group provoked an exclusionary reaction, the April 2017 Sparkbrook incident saw a more sedate, unified and community-based approach from local politicians, police officers and faith leaders. For example, the September 2016 protest attracted the sort of counter demonstrators that you would expect to see at an EDL demonstration – with one assembled SWP activist stating that: 'Britain First are a Neo-Nazi group which degrades what our country is about. Racism divides us, allowing the Government and employers to get away with paying low wages to hard-working people' (Kuczora 3rd September 2016).

In contrast, a far more concerted response was seen after Britain First's April 2017 appearance in Sparkbrook. For example, police patrolled Islamic bookshops and met with local residents to reassure the areas Muslim community. Meanwhile, members of both Christian and Muslim faith communities came together in visible displays of solidarity. Also, local Councillors, such as Mariam Khan, came out to show their support – engaging in activities to reassure communities and make sure that they felt safe (Rodger 19th April 2017). Finally, this all happened on Easter Sunday and showed a softer exclusionary response to the harder one that was exhibited in relation to the New Street incident the previous September and EDL protests previously.

### ***(c) Conclusion***

Britain First's visits to Birmingham's city centre and Sparkbrook have been fairly low-level and transitory affairs when compared with visits by the EDL in years

gone by. As one interviewee posits: ‘the [September 2016] one was largely unnoticed, largely irrelevant’ (Birmingham 3 2017). Despite both incidents passing off peacefully, this is not to say that there was not potential for conflagrations to result in response to such actions. While nobody was physically hurt, the impact of Britain First in New Street and Sparkbrook was enough to precipitate a sizeable response from the local community. Moreover, the ramifications for community relations as a result of these incidences cannot be downplayed. Fortunately, however, West Midlands Police and local politicians did a good job in providing a proportionate response to both events – with learnings about a more consensual and inclusionary response taken forward. Finally, the response by the local community in the Sparkbrook incident showed a hearteningly positive and proactive response to incursions by Britain First – fostering further community interaction and solidarity in the wake of such incidents.

## Conclusion

The advent of EDL protest in Birmingham in 2009 demonstrates the fairly steep learning curve local elites have been on when a new form of anti-Islamic protest first visits a particular locale. The site of some of the EDL’s earliest and most disorderly demonstrations, politicians within the city responded to the 2009 protests with a mixture of confusion and surprise. After this initial period of confusion, however, most political elites became harder in their exclusionary stance and their public-order proscriptions towards the group. An example of this was Steve McCabe, Birmingham MP for Selly Oak, who switched from being anti-ban to pro-ban in less than two years. This was part of a broader shift by local politicians towards a consensus around banning the group and much stronger public statements against the EDL at subsequent demonstrations. Moreover, in July 2013, Khalid Mahmood switched from merely being pro-ban to openly advocating levying costs on EDL demonstrators who caused criminal damage. By 2014, political elites had therefore acknowledged that they needed to be on the ‘front foot’ in challenging the EDL when the protest movement came to demonstrate in the city. This period was then replicated when Britain First arrived in the city several years later – with both police and politicians taking proportionate measures in dealing with anti-Islamic protest.

Responses by local politicians to both groups were not, however, all overt acts of hard exclusion. For example, officials at Birmingham’s City Council took a more consultative and inclusivist approach – engaging with Muslim community groups in the lead up to and on the day of EDL demonstrations. Initially picked up upon at the 2009 demonstrations and an unstated but important issue elsewhere, there was real concern about the involvement by Asian youths in violent disorder and the impact this was having on the city’s sizeable Muslim population. Therefore, over the course of the four EDL demonstrations from 2011, officials at the local Council worked closely with key community figures to make sure that young people were being warned to ‘stay away’ from the EDL protests and that the Asian community were reassured about protections put in place when the EDL came to protest. This was broadly successful with only one major incident occurring in

2013. Fortunately, there were no repeats of 2009 where Asian youths engaged in running battles with the EDL – suggesting that proper engagement and successful integration of the approach into the local public-order apparatus had taken place.

The hard exclusionary nature of political (and Council-led) responses has, however, evolved in contrast to the policing response in Birmingham, and presents the central paradox at the heart of the ‘Birmingham case.’ Following three peaks of disorder in August–September 2009 and July 2013 (Figure 4.2), West Midlands Police moved from a more confrontational style of public-order policing in 2009 towards a less confrontational, more inclusive and lower-level policing response at subsequent anti-Islam demonstrations. This was based on a realisation that by providing such groups with confrontation, the police effectively entered the EDL’s dynamic of provocation and therefore less confrontation and better dialogue between protesters and the police was needed to improve public-order management. Examples of this came in 2011, 2014, 2016 and 2017 when the police consulted more closely with the EDL and Britain First and when the police (either intentionally or unintentionally) struck a less high-profile presence to reduce the ‘hype’ around the day’s protests. This, combined with a much-diminished EDL and Britain First ‘threat,’ aided both protest events to pass off peacefully in 2011, 2014, 2016 and 2017 – with only a minor level of disorder occurring on each occasion.

A note of caution, however, has to be sounded here about the causality between responses and its bearing on successful protest outcomes (low disorder, zero arrests). In particular, this chapter has shown that in some instances, intra-group dynamics of a protest group can work independently of responses to determine how ‘difficult’ or ‘easy’ such groups are to police. For example, in the case of the 2013 EDL demonstration, police forces went up against an aggrieved protest movement, which resulted in a spike in disorder. In contrast, the poor weather experienced at the time of the 2011 protest made it (literally) a damp squib. This is not to say that responses are unimportant, but that the success of such responses are channelled, tempered and moulded through situations and factors within a

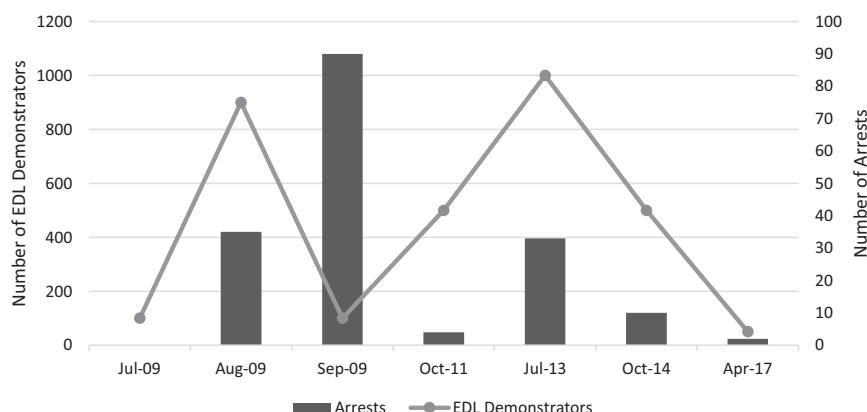


Figure 4.2 Birmingham’s total EDL demonstrator turnout and arrest count, July 2009–April 2017

protest movement that might be outside the reach of police and politicians. Moreover, 2013 was the first instance in our study of how rowing back on previous successful adaptations to EDL protest can see a resurgence of disorder.

In summary then, what lies at the heart of Birmingham's adaptation to anti-Islamic protest is a paradox: while politicians have been increasingly exclusionary in their treatment of the EDL and Britain First, the police have become more inclusionary. This was not due to a lack of communication between the two, with local politicians being increasingly consulted on the location and operational decisions around anti-Islamic demonstrations. It is merely a symptom of external stimuli – with an appearance of hard exclusion missing in the political case and lesson learning around confrontation happening in the policing case. What this will mean for future public-order management in the city is hard to say. It does, however, point to the potential for two competing strategies to co-exist at the heart of a successful response to anti-Islamic protest – bearing out the argument that a unified strategy between police and politicians is sufficient but is not always the case. As shown in the next chapter, however, a unified outlook does help – knitting together responses from different sectors into a coherent whole. It is to the case of Bradford that we will now turn.

## Note

- 1 Since 1985, those seeking election to the lower chamber of the UK Houses of Parliament (the House of Commons) are required to submit a £500 deposit on submission of papers for their candidature (*Election Commission* August 2009). Successfully securing 5% or more of the popular vote means that the candidate is refunded (post-election) the entirety of their deposit.

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## **5 West Yorkshire's response to anti-Islamic protest**

### **Policy responses to the EDL and Britain First in Bradford**

What we were worried about was [sic] the headlines on the press the next day being ‘riot in Bradford’ and that’s what the main thing we wanted to avoid.

A former Bradfordian MP (Bradford 1 2014), commenting on the EDL’s August 2010 demonstration

The issue that we have had with Britain First is that their tactic is to not engage and basically to turn up unannounced. Obviously then there is no policing response around that. So the first thing we hear about Britain First is when they’ve landed on our door step.

A senior police officer (Bradford 9 2017), commenting on Britain First’s 2014 and 2016 visits to Bradford

### **Introduction**

Bradford presents an important marker for studying anti-Islamic protest. The EDL has visited the area on three separate occasions in the past nine years: on 8th August 2010 as part of its Northern expansion strategy (Taylor 28th May 2010), on 12th October 2013 for a ‘national rally’ and on 14th November 2015 for a ‘local rally’ highlighting concerns around child sexual exploitation (EDL 15th July 2015). In the interim, a more ideologically radical splinter group, named the ‘North West Infidels,’ was formed and the EDL’s founder and leader, Tommy Robinson, left. Bradford, therefore, plays an inauspicious but important staging post in EDL history – being both one of the places where the group first fragmented and where the leaderless organisation hosted its first post-Robinson rallies.

Bradford is also crucial to the study of responses to anti-Islamic protest. In comparison to other cities included in this study, local politicians and the police were arguably ‘ready’ for the EDL when they came in 2010, 2013 and 2015. Nine years earlier, the far right had sparked some of the worst race riots in recent times in the city. Six years earlier, the British National Party returned four far-right candidates to the local district council. MPs and Councillors were, therefore, well versed in the public-order and community cohesion challenges posed by the EDL when they first came in August 2010.

The EDL were not the end of this more recent round of far-right activism in Bradford, however (Figure 5.1). A year after the group’s second largest demonstration

in the city, Britain First conducted a host of so-called Mosque Invasions in the city. While nobody was harmed, activists of the group visited the city's two major Abu Bakr and Madni mosques and the home of the then Lord Mayor, Khadim Hussain. Moving forward, Britain First again appeared unannounced in Bradford's city centre in February 2016. Largely ignored by passers-by, things took a sinister turn when the group tried to unfurl one of its banners outside of the city's Eastgate Mosque. The group was dispersed then by police and has not returned to Bradford since.

The first section of this chapter aims to demonstrate how, in comparison to Birmingham, Bradford's politicians arrived at the previously mentioned state of readiness and the effect it had on their responses to anti-Islamic protest. We will then move on to analyse the specific preparations for and responses to anti-Islamic protest and how they varied within and between the EDL and Britain First. Finally, we will conclude with a comparative assessment of the advantages and disadvantages of exclusionary and inclusionary responses – suggesting why the latter makes for a more sustainable approach to anti-Islamic protest in the long-term.



*Figure 5.1 'Mapping hate': mobilisations by Britain First in Bradford*

## Context

### *(a) Deindustrialisation and migration in Bradford*

Bradford rose to prominence as a textile-manufacturing town during the nineteenth century. Along with many other Yorkshire mill towns, the industrialisation of wool-making led to the transformation of a small rural market town into a large and thriving metropolis, which consumed one-fifth of Britain's wool a year by 1853 (Richardson 1976: 80). A sign of the increased activity during this period, the local population increased almost ten-fold, from 13,264 in 1801 to 103,778 in 1851 (*ibid.*: 92). Civic monuments, like the Venetian-style City Hall and the Wool Exchange, still stand testament to this boom period when the city became known as the 'Wool Capital of the World.'

During the 1950s, however, changes wrought by innovations in Northwest Europe and Japan – as well as alterations to national labour laws – posed a fundamental challenge to Bradford's textile industry. In particular, mills in the area had to upgrade their machinery and change to a twenty-four-hour shift cycle in order to keep up with competition on the continent and elsewhere. Moreover, post-war labour shortages were further exacerbated by legislation banning women working nights in peacetime and a refusal by local residents to work in the mills (Hill 2013: 173). This compounded a trend of decline that had started in the 1920s, in which the Great Depression saw many mills either driven out of business or scaling back production (Keighley 2007: 50).

In order to address employment shortages and adapt to this new shift cycle, Bradford's mill owners recruited labourers from the New Commonwealth in the mid-1950s. Most of these economic migrants hailed from Afghanistan, the Mirpur region of Pakistan, the Campbellpuri region of the Punjab and the city of Sylhet in Bangladesh. Initially they came as short-term night workers, intending to save money and enjoying a better quality of life when they returned home (Hill 2013: 175). The attraction of steady employment and an improved standard of living meant, however, that many short-term labourers settled, with changes in immigration laws seeing a fresh wave of migration in 1962 as men were joined by their spouses and children (Valentine 2006: 4). Around 26.8% of Bradford's residents now describe themselves as either Asian or Asian British (ONS 2011), two-thirds of whom live in four wards skirting the city centre (Bradford Libraries, Archives & Information Service n.d.). This influx could not, however, save Bradford's ailing post-war textile economy; between 1950 and 1967, the number of textile firms dropped by a third and the number of people employed by textile firms was reduced by half. A sign of the inefficiencies of having so many small, family-run firms, the 1970s saw half of Bradford's textile firms being incorporated into fifteen companies in order to take advantage of the economies of scale (Hill 2013: 171).

The decline of the textile mills did not, however, spell the end of industry in Bradford. When the manufacture of wool and cotton went into decline between the 1920s and 1930s (and then for a second time, post-1945), new industries – such as engineering and printing – came to fill its place, with further diversification

coming later with the manufacture of televisions and tractors. Moreover, in the 1950s and 1960s, there was a sharp uptick in white collar jobs. Banking, insurance, local government and the civil service became popular areas of employment in Bradford – with an increase of 6,500 employees between 1968 and 1973 alone (Richardson 1976: 124). Meanwhile, manufacturing jobs were almost halved (*ibid.*). Recession and unemployment in the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, led to a sharp fall in economic outputs in the city (Lambert 2015). At the start of the twenty-first century, the financial and services sectors have replaced industry as key local economic assets – with Santander UK and the Morrison's supermarket chain locating their headquarters in the city. Today, the service sector makes up 82% of current employment in the Bradford area (Athwal et al. July 2011: 9).

Like Birmingham, this mix of deindustrialisation and migration has posed a set of complex and separate socio-economic challenges or 'shocks' for the city that have laid the conditions for far-right support. According to recent figures, one-third of Bradford's Super Output Areas<sup>1</sup> are in the 10% most deprived areas of the UK (BMDC 2nd February 2017) and the infant mortality rate is one-third above the national average (BMDC 7th April 2016). Moreover, Bradford also has some of the highest unemployment rates in the Yorkshire region, ranking top of the latest unemployment benefit claimant rates (BMDC 14th June 2017). In addition, a 2003 report by the Forum Against Islamophobia and Racism suggested that Bradford was a 'fragmented community' with segregation occurring along racial and religious lines in both education and housing (Allen 2003: 18). Meanwhile, those participating in the compilation of the post-riots Cantle report also suggested that they 'were "struck by the depth of polarisation" that existed' in Bradford (Cantle 2001: 9). Studies suggest that such segregation has been self-selecting and reinforcing – emanating from both 'white flight' (Ratcliffe 2001: 82) as well as the 'ghetto mentality' of some local Pakistani-Bangladeshi residents, who hail from conservative rural areas where kinship ties are still a key part of community life (Valentine 2006: 5). No other town or city under study has been suggested to be more socially polarised or segregated than Bradford at this time, and provides a counterfactual to the multicultural harmony of Leicester.

### **(b) The 1995 Manningham and 2001 mill town riots**

This mix of deprivation and polarisation came to a head in the summers of 1995 and 2001. In the former case, protest erupted in the Manningham area of the city after a football match outside a local police station got out of hand. Reports suggest local youths played 'cat and mouse' with the police as they were pursued through the streets (Buhler et al. 2002: 8). Anger flared as rumours spread about the police assaulting a woman and a boy. Peace was restored after a meeting with community leaders a couple of days later. Crucially, the riot was contained within the Manningham precinct and was seen as the result of internal rather than external agitation. Of the sixteen convicted, four prison sentences were handed down. Moreover, £9 million of public money was invested in Manningham to prevent any disturbances from re-occurring (Harris 30th June 2002).

Six years later, however, Manningham was to see a repeat of the riots but on a 'much more serious scale' (BBC News 8th July 2001). In July 2001, disorder came about after activists from the National Front hurled insults at passing Anti-Nazi League protesters. Tensions flared and the disorder moved up again into Manningham as local Asian youths tried to defend their families and community. Bricks, bottles and petrol bombs were hurled at the police as around 1,000 (mostly Asian) youths were caught up in the disorder (*ibid.*). Manningham's Labour club was also set alight with twenty-three members trapped inside, in what one scholar has described as an 'attempted suicide by a community – a cry for help' (Valentine 2006: 7).

Unfortunately for the Asian men involved and their families, judges took a 'zero tolerance' approach to sentencing policy in the wake of the 2001 disturbances. In what can be considered a case of 'double-loop learning,' whereby an organisation seeks to 'resolve incompatible . . . norms by setting new priorities' (Argyis and Schön 1978: 24), local courts handed out particularly punitive prison terms. This was to combat a perception, particularly amongst the white working-class community, that the courts had pursued 'the soft option' six years earlier (Bradford 2 2015). In the end, 278 people, including some as young as 14, were given sentences of up to five years for their involvement (Buhler et al. 2002: 9). Former Chair and Chief Executive of the Commission for Racial Equality and author of a major post-riots report, Lord Ouseley, collectively described the sentences as 'savage' and 'unjust' (Allen 2003: 8). As one local Councillor commented: 'several hundred young Asian men almost exclusively ended up ruining their lives' over that July weekend (Bradford 2 2015).

More than ten years on, opinion is still mixed as to whether Bradford has learnt from the riots. Lanre Bakare, a University student at the time of the 2001 riots, argues that progress had been made. He cites the city's school exchange programme as a shining example of how Bradfordians have fought against segregation (Bakare 7th July 2011). Moreover, another article on the riot's tenth anniversary celebrated Manningham as having amongst the lowest crime rates in the city (BBC News 6th July 2011). Recent evidence suggests that ethnic mixing in Bradford is also on the rise (Kelly 2015). On the other hand, Ted Cantle, author of the Home Office report into the 2001 disturbances, remains unconvinced. On the tenth anniversary of the riots, he suggested that Bradford still remains 'one of the most deeply segregated [cities] in the country' (BBC News 7th July 2011). Cantle cites 'divided workplaces, schools, housing areas' as particularly problematic (*ibid.*). Unsurprisingly, the local Council disagrees. In an article marking the tenth anniversary of the riots, they were keen to point out that a number of initiatives have been put in place to challenge intolerance and to dispel myths amongst local communities (*ibid.*).

### **(c) Right-wing extremism and Islamist extremism in Bradford**

It is no surprise, then, that far-right groups have tried to exploit the deprivation and polarisation in Bradford for their own advantage. As far back as 1976, the

National Front marched through the town. In what was later named the ‘Battle of Bradford,’ local residents fought back against anti-migrant protesters (Yorkshire Film Archive n.d.). Meanwhile, in 2004, Bradford received the inauspicious reputation of hosting one of the British National Party’s earliest breakthroughs. In the May elections that year, the party claimed four Council seats in the Keighley West, Wisbey, Wyke and Queensbury wards – seizing on white working-class uncertainty over settled Asian populations to take seats off Labour incumbents (BBC News 11th June 2004).<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the local town of Keighley was unfortunate enough to host the second bid of former BNP chairman, Nick Griffin, to secure a Parliamentary seat in 2005. After a rather ugly campaign, Griffin came last with 9.2% of the vote against Labour incumbent Ann Cryer (Bunting 14th February 2005).

In addition, Bradford has also hosted instances of Islamist extremism. For example, Shehzad Tanweer, one of the 2005 7/7 bombers, was born in Bradford (BBC News 6th July 2006). Moreover, in March the following year, four radicalised University of Bradford students were arrested on terror offences (MacLeod 7th March 2006), while 2007 brought news of a Bradfordian school boy guilty of travelling to Pakistan for terrorist training (Gardham 25th July 2007). In sum, these isolated instances paint only a fragmented and weak picture of Islamist extremism in Bradford. An initial (but significant) instance of anti-Islamic protest in the town, the EDL was, however, able to seize on these examples on its first visit to the city in summer 2010.

### **Bradford’s first EDL demonstration (28th August 2010)**

In late May 2010, the English Defence League announced for the first time that it would ‘hit’ Bradford. In what was popularly referred to amongst EDL activists as the ‘Big One,’ the protest group visited Bradford on a bank holiday in the middle of Ramadan (Bujra and Pearce 2011: 191). The hype around the demonstration was not simply rhetorical; around 5,000 demonstrators were predicted to descend upon the city and eagerly anticipated the riot that would follow (Blake 2011: 139). To add insult to injury, activists within the EDL described the city as the ‘[Islamic] extremist’s Northern stronghold’ (*ibid.*: 138). It was therefore appropriate for one senior Bradfordian politician to suggest that there was ‘a lot of nervousness’ in Bradford when the EDL came in 2010 (Bradford 3 2015). Expectation and hype did not materialise, however; only 700 EDL demonstrators turned up and were confined to Urban Gardens, an area close the city’s Forster Square train station (Sawer 28th August 2010). The policing charge for the day, however, was well over £1 million (BBC News 29th August 2010) – a ‘costly response,’ according to one senior Bradfordian politician (Bradford 3 2015).

#### **(a) Wider preparations**

Unfortunately for the EDL, the local authorities and police were on the ‘front foot’ when the EDL came to visit in August 2010. With the city’s history of riots and

complex questions about community cohesion in mind, Bradfordian politicians were keen to avoid any flashpoints that might have caused the riots happening again. As one former senior Councillor (Bradford 2: 2015), comments:

We had several riots in Bradford. The last one was disastrous for the reputation in the district. The feeling within and outside the district was that all that needed to happen was a few right-wingers to turn up and the place would burn. So we had to look at how we would approach that.

Numerous preparations were therefore set in train to minimise disruption and disturbance in the city. First, a ban on the EDL marching was secured a week before the demonstration; this came after a 10,000-strong petition of local residents against the EDL's presence was collected by the anti-fascist outfit Hope not Hate and sent to the West Yorkshire Police (Lowles 17th August 2010). The police were therefore persuaded that there were 'understandable concerns' within the community that a march would lead to a repeat of scenes, nine years earlier (The Daily Telegraph 20th August 2010). This appeared alongside other more common concerns seen at other EDL protests, such as the need to protect communities and local property (*ibid.*). The issue of the ban was described as 'very positive' by one senior Bradfordian politician, despite it not being a 'chance to relax' (Bradford 3 2015).

Second, West Yorkshire Police used 'overwhelming force' in order to make sure they were ready for every eventuality in 2010 (Bradford 2 2015). On the morning of the demonstration, 1,600 police officers from thirteen forces gathered in a local stadium in an operation which was widely hailed as a local success and a national 'gold standard' for public-order management of the EDL (Telegraph and Argus 30th August 2010). Beforehand, numerous scenarios around arrests and rumour-busting techniques were practised (Bradford 4 2015). Ishtiaq Ahmed, spokesperson for the Bradford Council for Mosques, described the police response as 'courageous' and 'appropriate' (BBC News 29th August 2010). Another senior Bradford politician described the police as being 'very understanding' and 'very helpful' (Bradford 3 2015). In the end, police officers outnumbered EDL demonstrators by more than 2 to 1.

In a sign of the nascent nature of police responses to the EDL and the chaotic nature of the early movement, this did not, however, stop significant cases of disorder breaking out. On the day of the August 2010 demonstration at 2 p.m., EDL supporters surged towards police lines as young people from the Asian community and anti-fascists gathered and came into sight at the Cheapside area of the city (Sawer 28th August 2010). Bottles, stones and smoke flares were thrown as riot police tried to force demonstrators back, with many EDL demonstrators escaping into a neighbouring building site behind the protest muster point. Police had to react quickly to the situation – putting on riot equipment to quell disorder amongst EDL protesters. In a distinctly counterproductive move, however, most missiles thrown by EDL supporters missed the police and hit other activists. It was also notable that at this stage the fledgling movement didn't have any stewarding

that featured so heavily in the group's later protests, with nobody from within the movement keeping control of aggression and disorder.

Third, an 'aggressive' youth and media strategy was also put in place in 2010 (Bradford 2 2015). On the day of the demonstration, nearly 1,000 young people were 'strategically' drafted out of the city to take part in a walk in South Wales and to see a football match in nearby Manchester (*ibid.*). It also involved 'reaching out' to the 'voluntary sector' and 'back street gyms' to get across the message of no disruption to the young people of Bradford (Bradford 3 2015). Moreover, community leaders and key community contacts were communicated with and kept informed about developments. Again, this was with a view that they would be able to persuade the remaining young people to keep off the streets. For example, 'consequences cards' were distributed in the run up to the demonstration – alerting youngsters to the consequences of disorder (Bujra and Pearce 2011: 198). In addition, local businesses were spoken to with clear priorities set around reducing damage to property as well as the commercial reputation of the city. Importantly, senior local politicians and members of the police were also engaged in talks with the city's *Telegraph and Argus* newspaper about their coverage of the event – with the hope that messages broadcast by the paper would not be counter-productive (JUST West Yorkshire 28th February 2011).

Fourth, a community event, named 'Be Bradford – Peaceful Together,' was held on the day at Infirmary Fields in Manningham. This was to give the community a voice as other anti-fascist events occurred elsewhere in the city (Bradford 4 2015). A band, a bouncy castle and book stalls were set up, and the local Pakistani-Bangladeshi community was invited to participate. Perhaps more importantly, however, was the event's symbolism – people from the Manningham area standing against events that had previously blighted their community and making sure they didn't happen again. Unfortunately, the community event was poorly attended (Bradford 1 2014). Perversely, this was a sign of the effectiveness of local mosques getting out the message that people should stay indoors and away from the main site of protest (*ibid.*).

### **(b) Political responses**

The advent of anti-Islamic protest coming to Bradford also evoked a variety of political responses. Unsurprisingly, the initial news of the EDL coming to Bradford provoked a largely unified set of exclusionary responses. For example, local MP and former leader of Bradford Council, Kris Hopkins, stated that 'we must be careful not to give the EDL the oxygen of publicity they so keenly crave' (Bourley 29th July 2010). Moreover, and as another local MP also suggested: 'the last thing that Bradford needs is the EDL marching through the city and equally the last thing we need is an opposing rent-a-mob as well' (Bradford 5 2015).

This exclusionary response was echoed by the local Labour party, but with differing measures advocated. For example, Marsha Singh, the late MP for Bradford West, was particularly active in building pressure for a ban at Parliamentary and local levels. In the end, he felt in his 'bones that [the demonstration would] lead to trouble' (Bourley 29th July 2010). He led an Early Day Motion in Parliament

calling for 'Government departments to . . . quash this new non-political social movement' (HC Early Day Motion 2182 28th October 2009) and helped pioneer the 10,000-strong petition before his untimely death in July 2012.

In addition, Gerry Sutcliffe, MP for Bradford South, took a similarly robust approach. Though late to publicly support a ban, Sutcliffe eventually declared his support by advocating that people sign the Hope not Hate petition to be sent to the Home Secretary in July 2010 (Black 30th July 2010). Moreover, tabling a Parliamentary Question after the 2010 demonstration, Sutcliffe also asked if there were any further measures being enacted to restrict the activity of groups like the EDL beyond those that were already on the statute books (HC Debate 6th September 2010, c5). Ian Greenwood, Labour Council Leader at the time, was also late to publicly support a ban. It wasn't until late July that he asked the Home Secretary's consent for a ban, suggesting that 'everyone has a right to protest peacefully. . . , but the EDL's activities in other towns and cities across the country have resulted in significant disruption' (Meneaud 27th July 2010).

In contrast, local Liberal Democrats adopted a softer, more reflective form of exclusion that wished to 'not simply wait for the "storm" to pass, but to harness it [for] fundamental change' in 2010 (Bujra and Pearce 2011: 195). David Ward, former MP for Bradford East, was more hesitant in lobbying for a march ban than other local politicians. He insisted that it wasn't as straightforward as it first seemed and that the community needed to work together to deal with the 'EDL threat' (Bourley 29th July 2010). Moreover, another local Liberal Democrat Councillor also adopted this more reflective approach. Critical of the Council leadership at the time, they also disagreed that banning the EDL march was not the way forward. This was both because it would replicate the same rigid policing approach that they perceived had led to the riots in 2001, but also that 'whether you like them or not they've got a legitimate right to demonstrate' (Bradford 4 2015). Instead, 'a big community response' was needed where everyone in the local area was liaised about the policing of the day's events (*ibid.*). Conservative MP for nearby Shipley, Philip Davies, took a different tack. In a July 2010 *Telegraph and Argus* article, Davies suggested that the best thing would be to simply ignore the EDL's presence and leave the police to treat such groups as a 'law and order' issue (Bourley 29th July 2010).

### (c) Conclusion

The EDL's 28th August Bradford protest in 2010 sent a shock wave through the local community and political elites. Significant worries about a repeat of rioting nine years previous were evoked by the group's presence, and it became a key focal point when the local authority came to construct its response to the group's presence. Fortunately and in contrast to Birmingham in 2009, local elites were then arguably 'ready' when the group arrived in August 2010. A policing response that has been since used in HMIC reports on public-order management<sup>3</sup> was rolled out and the local Muslim community decided to heed calls to stay away. In terms of political responses, these were largely exclusionary but with a softer exclusionary approach coming from local Liberal Democrats. Unlike Birmingham's first

brush with the EDL, this did not, however, stoke confusion amongst the police – with a clear push to ban the group from marching only being let down by some EDL protesters bent on disorder. In the end, then, the 2010 demonstration was a great result for the city – showing its resilience to a large-scale public-order event organised by a right-wing extremist group.

### **Bradford's second EDL demonstration (12th October 2013)**

The return of anti-Islamic protests to Bradford in autumn of 2013 marked a significant shift for the protest group and the approach taken by local elites. Compared to 2010, local leaders and police officers had a basis on which to learn lessons and implement real experience. It was also the first demonstration after the EDL's co-founder and leader, Tommy Robinson, exited the EDL – citing fears of far-right extremism within the movement as key to his departure (BBC News 8th October 2013). A 'national' rally, the second demonstration, was held to protest concerns about issues including child sexual exploitation amongst the Muslim community (Meredith 12th October 2013). On the day, 2,500 officers were drafted in to police over 300 EDL demonstrators with a total of twelve arrests made (Bond 12th October 2013). Almost to prove Robinson's point, rumours circulated before the demonstration that other notable factions of the UK far right (such as the National Front) would be joining the October protest (Pidd and Williamson 11th October 2013).

#### **(a) Wider preparations**

One of the first lessons implemented from 2010 was that a non-ban response could be as good as a march ban, as long as you had sufficient police resources and organisation to fend off instances of disorder on the day of the demonstration (Bradford 2 2015). In contrast to the 2010 demonstration, therefore, a ban on the march was not successfully secured. In the case of 2013, the local constabulary admitted that the banning of the demonstration was 'impossible' – pointing out that they didn't have the legal powers to do this (*ibid.*). In the end, though, a march ban wasn't arguably needed. The police stepped up their resources – with 900 more officers compared to three years previous, and the EDL was successfully contained near Bradford's main interchange train station.

Another key difference to preparations and the response on the day in 2013 came as a result of a change in Council leadership. In May 2012, the previous Council Leader, Ian Greenwood, was replaced by a Respect Councillor in his ward of Little Horton (Winrow 4th May 2012). This made way for the coronation of a new Council Leader, David Green, who led a less overtly aggressive campaign against the EDL's presence. Instead, Green hoped to stymie the inevitable 'hype' and press attention around the EDL coming to Bradford (Green 2015). For example, in the days leading up to the demonstration, Green deliberately cautioned the local community not to 'get embroiled or provoked' by the presence of the EDL or Unite Against Fascism (Black 11th October 2013). This was

echoed by his deputy, Imran Hussain, who encouraged a ‘dignified and peaceful’ response (*Telegraph and Argus* 10th October 2013a). He also suggested local residents should participate in a ‘Bradford Together’ event the Friday before the demonstration (*ibid.*).

A second element of Green’s strategy in 2013 was to try to put the rights of the local community and businesses before EDL demonstrators. In the lead up to the demonstration in 2013, Green wrote to the Prime Minister expressing his concerns that ‘current legislation puts the emphasis on the rights of the demonstrators, not the community, despite evidence of the disruption caused and the real aims of some of the organisers of such demonstrations’ (*Telegraph and Argus* 8th October 2013). The results of this intervention weren’t terribly successful, however. In an interview while visiting Bradford, David Cameron dismissed the case for reform – suggesting that banning marches was sufficient (*Telegraph and Argus* 10th October 2013b). Not perturbed, however, Green – in liaison with the police – was able to contain the EDL near Bradford’s main Interchange station. This was away from the City’s main shopping precinct in Kirkgate and Iveygate, and built on the lessons of 2010 – when businesses had ‘suffered greatly’ (Green 2015).

A third element of Green’s response to anti-Islamic protest was broader engagement with white working-class communities. In particular, Green responded to a 2008 BBC Two documentary, ‘Last Orders,’ based in a Working Men’s Club in his Wibsey ward by holding surgeries there ‘quite deliberately, quite provocatively’ to engage with local residents’ views on questions of race and cultural diversity (*ibid.*). These interventions were designed to combat prejudice and what he calls the ‘folk law bubble’ that emerges when different communities aren’t in dialogue with each other. For example, Green would combat perceptions of criminality in the Asian community by illustrating in his conversations with local residents how it was evident in all communities.

Another key innovation which built on the lessons of 2010 EDL demonstration was more sensible proposals on the issue of banning orders. In the wake of an estimated £1 million loss to local business in 2010, West Yorkshire’s Police and Crime Commissioner, Mark Burns-Williamson, asked the Home Secretary to provide chief constables with enhanced powers to ban demonstrations (*Telegraph and Argus* 15th October 2013). Local Liberal Democrat MP, David Ward, seconded this – suggesting that decisions on bans should be moved from the Home Secretary to local Police and Crime Commissioners (*ibid.*).

Lessons were also brought forward from the 2001 riots by the Council leadership in 2013, albeit in a less overt way than in 2010. David Green, for example, made speaking on behalf of the local community a key part of his strategy in 2013, doing something the police couldn’t do by articulating the feeling that ‘there are challenges in Bradford that the people of Bradford want to sort out ourselves. We don’t need people coming in and causing trouble’ (Green 2015). Moreover, we can also see lessons from the 2001 riots in his calls for calm the Friday before the protest. As Green articulates: ‘it doesn’t take much for something to kick off a bit . . . the Bradford riots . . . we know the damage that was caused to people’s lives when they got embroiled in that’ (*ibid.*).

**(b) Political responses**

Political responses in 2013 were more muted but no less exclusionary than in 2010. Local MPs, George Galloway and Gerry Sutcliffe, led a very active joint campaign to get the EDL's October 2013 demonstration cancelled. For example, George Galloway sponsored an Early Day Motion, which called on a ban for the EDL March in Bradford, which Sutcliffe signed. Their grounds for getting the EDL banned were based on the potential for the group to 'incite racial division, hatred and violence' (HC Early Day Motion 491 2013). In addition to their Parliamentary activities, both MPs went to the local press to mount pressure for a ban. More than a week before the demonstration took place, Sutcliffe and Galloway also released a joint statement in the *Yorkshire Post* (Yorkshire Post 2nd October 2013). Furthermore, they sent a co-signed letter to West Yorkshire's Police and Crime Commissioner and Chief Constable requesting a ban (*ibid.*).

Heightened campaigning around a ban in 2013 wasn't exclusively at the Parliamentary level of local representation, however. In one particularly provocative intervention, a Council motion to proscribe the EDL from Bradford was tabled by one local Respect Councillor, Alyas Karmani (Telegraph and Argus 23rd October 2013). The contents of the motion were to connect the EDL's penchant for political violence with terrorism. The motion was, however, quickly derided and didn't attract mass support amongst the local political community. As then Council Leader, David Green, commented at the time, using terror legislation to ban a group that people simply disagreed with was perhaps 'a step too far.' Leader of the Conservative Group, Glen Miller, added that: 'banning them gives them the publicity they need' (*ibid.*). In the end, the Council agreed to write to the Home Secretary. They asked for an urgent review to be made of whether decisions around banning orders could be taken locally (*ibid.*). This was based on the principle of localism, or the notion that 'those closest to the local situation knew best.'

Another key difference in the 2013 political response was the heightened presence of community counter mobilisations during and prior to the protests. First, 'Bradford Together'<sup>4</sup> held a unity celebration on the Friday before the EDL demonstration (Telegraph and Argus 11th October 2013). Around 1,000 local people turned out for the vigil, where over 2,500 green ribbons were tied to landmarks in the city centre (Meredith 12th October 2013). Members of the community were encouraged to write a message of hope on a postcard for a peace wall. Second, there was also a 'We are Bradford' counter demonstration held on the day of the demonstration itself. This involved local trade unions and faith groups and was part of the anti-fascist counter protest. David Green and George Galloway, as well as other local politicians, attended the counter demonstration on the day of protest (ITV News 11th October 2013).

**(c) Conclusion**

The 2013 demonstration was a calmer and more sedate affair that learnt from the lessons of the riots and from the 2010 EDL protest. Interviewees suggest that 'a

more mature approach' had been arrived at in 2013 and that the police's use of 2010 as a 'training event' had put them in good stead when the EDL came again in 2013 (Bradford 6 2014). The local authority and political actors had therefore obviously 'learnt from experience,' leading to a 'dud event' in 2013 (Bradford 1 2014). Moreover, Bradford had also shown 'strong unity and resilience' on the second occasion it had faced the EDL (Telegraph and Argus 13th October 2013). When asked, most local politicians put the diminished EDL numbers down to internal events within the group rather than as a direct result of 2010 interventions (Bradford 4 2015). In any case, and in an instance of single-loop learning where 'members of an organization respond to changes in the internal and external environments . . . by detecting errors which they then correct' (Argyis and Schön 1978: 18), the fact that anti-Islamic protest had been to Bradford before posed a key asset to local politicians, helping them to learn the lessons of three years previous.

### **Bradford's initial Britain First visit (10th May 2014)**

Anti-Islamic activism in Bradford didn't, however, stop with the EDL. Taking advantage of the group's post-2013 decline, Britain First appeared at ten mosques in Bradford in May 2014, handing out leaflets and British Army Bibles to imams and worshippers (Pidd and Lloyd 13th May 2014). Moreover, they also visited the home of the then Lord Mayor, Khadim Hussain, and the campaign headquarters of Bradford City ward Councillor, Nazam Azam (Brown 11th May 2014). This came as part of a broader 'Christian Crusade' campaign by the group that summer – 'invading' mosques in Glasgow, Luton and East London and asking them what they were doing about 'Muslim grooming gangs' (Tell MAMA July 2014). Britain First vowed to return to Bradford again after the initial set of invasions – saying that they were 'only getting warmed up!' (Pidd and Lloyd 13th May 2014). For obvious reasons, this upset the local Muslim community a great deal – with the police having to quash a number of local rumours about Britain First 're-visits,' post-2014 (Bradford 9 2017).

#### **(a) Wider preparations**

Such a sinister turn in anti-Islamic activism caused great surprise amongst policymakers in Bradford. Concerned that another incursion by a far-right group might act as a flashpoint for rioting, local politicians and the police were largely caught off-guard when the group conducted what at the time some suggested as being an action 'co-ordinated with almost military precision' (Pidd and Lloyd 13th May 2014). As one former MP told the author: '[if] a young lad had come in there and seen what was going on and it could have turned really nasty. That was what we feared most. Because it was unannounced you couldn't protect against it' (Bradford 1 2017).

There was, therefore, a real concerted effort by local and national policy elites to investigate, reassure and put in place countermeasures to make sure such

'invasions' wouldn't happen again. This was based on the understanding that what right-wing extremist groups are looking for in Bradford is to 'to provoke reaction' and telephone trees were set up between the police, community and the Council to make sure a rapid response could be facilitated (Bradford 7 2017). Moreover, in the immediate aftermath of the 'Mosque Invasions,' a community meeting was set up between police, local politicians and community elders at Bradford's Abu Bakr Mosque – one of the places of worship that had been affected. Describing the atmosphere at the meeting as 'calm and collected,' measures discussed at the meeting included guidance about what to do in the case of future incursions and how people should respond if it happened again (Bradford 1 2017).

Added to this, several senior policymakers in Bradford visited a number of the mosques affected by the incident to discuss the work that needed to be done within the community (Green 2017). One key tension that was identified was the essentially lawful nature of Britain First's actions and calls for central government to be doing something (Bradford 7 2017). Moreover, a second meeting was arranged the following Thursday between Secretary of the Bradford Council of Mosques and then Communities Minister, Stephen Williams (Pidd and Lloyd 13th May 2014). Finally, George Galloway and David Ward, then MPs for Bradford West and East, went to meet then Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, to see what the government could do to stop such 'invasions' from happening again (Telegraph and Argus 21st May 2014).

### ***(b) Political responses***

Political responses towards the May 2014 incident largely trod the same dividing lines that had been seen before in relation to the EDL. One of the first responses by local politicians was a joint statement condemning the actions of Britain First. This called on Bradfordians to 'reject Britain First's deliberate, provocative attempt to try to create division and hatred' and to form a united front in the wake of the 'Mosque Invasions' the weekend prior (Lowson 13th May 2014).

After this, however, divisions between softer and more hard-line exclusionary responses began to emerge. One of the first people to lead the harder line responses was former deputy leader of Bradford Council, Imran Hussain. He suggested that there should be a change in the law to protect places of worship and wrote to the Home Secretary to make his thoughts on the issue clear to the Home Office (Asian Standard 20th May 2014). Perhaps the exclusionary response *par excellence*, however, came from Bradford West's former MP, George Galloway. Also writing a letter to the then Home Secretary, Theresa May, Galloway demanded action be taken to reassure communities and to ban Britain First – a group he deemed to be 'a racist, neo-fascist gang of fanatics' (Pidd and Lloyd 13th May 2014). In a further statement, Galloway posited that 'full police action and protection of Mosques and worshippers' was needed' in order to prevent a repeat of the same attacks happening again (Brown 11th May 2014).

Taking a slightly different tack, another senior MP at the time took a calmer and softer approach. In 2014, this former MP tried to 'strike a balance between taking

it seriously and not just inflating [the incident]' (Bradford 1 2017). Engaged in conversations about whether there should be new legislation to ban the group, this former public official took a similar line towards Britain First as they did towards the EDL, which was to emphasise that people should 'keep calm [and] be aware of the fact that there are some people especially when the EDL came that . . . wanted a fight' (*ibid.*). Complementing this was the then Lord Mayor, Khadim Hussain, who suggested that a 'non-response' or 'no oxygen' approach was best – as he believed the group was 'looking for a reaction' (Hussain 2017). In the end, he avoided any public statements about the 2014 incident and tried to keep a low profile. He suggested that the wider community of Bradford was 'not receptive' to Britain First and other far-right groups (*ibid.*).

### **(c) Conclusion**

Britain First's initial visit to Bradford in 2014 displayed a sinister turn in anti-Islamic activism. Visiting a number of mosques and the premises owned by the local Labour party, Britain First activists managed to conduct a quick and co-ordinated sweep of the city. As we can see, however, a lot of work was done by local and national policymakers to reassure the local community that measures were being put in place to protect worshippers. Moreover, there was a mix of both soft and hard exclusionary responses to this new far-right group – with some advocating new legislation and others a non-response. Typical of confusion about how to respond to Britain First, however, news emerged a year after the incident that the Crown Prosecution Service was not be able to bring charges against the group – showing how careful its leaders had been to not break the law on that occasion (Young 5th March 2015).

## **Bradford's third EDL demonstration (14th November 2015)**

The EDL's final major demonstration in Bradford came in the autumn of 2015. On 14th November of that year, eighty EDL demonstrators assembled in the Hall Ings area of Bradford city centre (Young 14th November 2015). The protest was sparsely attended and paled in comparison to previous protest events in the city. What was significant about this latest rally, however, was the number of arrests (eight). Despite a low turnout, it was actually higher than the EDL's inaugural August 2010 demonstration in the city. Moreover, offences were also of a more serious quality – with several EDL protestors being arrested for inciting racial hatred, breaches of the peace and public-order offences (*ibid.*).

### **(a) Wider preparations**

Like at other EDL demonstrations, a series of preparations were put together by the police and local authority officers after receiving notification of the EDL's latest intention to march in the city. First of all, a cordon was constructed around the area of the City Hall as part of a plan by the police to minimise the impact

of the demonstration on local residents and businesses (ITV News 14th November 2015). Over one hundred police officers from all over the North of England were drafted in to keep the peace (*ibid.*). Moreover, so-called reassurance engagement meetings were held between the Council and the local community, both to communicate messages of non-involvement to the local community and to measure the level of feeling about the impending march and to involve them in the planning process (Bradford District Assembly 3rd November 2015). Finally, on the day of the demonstration, Council officers from the local neighbourhood services division were 'embedded' within West Yorkshire Police's 'silver command' structure – using community activists to interdict anyone from the vicinity bent on causing trouble (Bradford 8 2017). This ensured that the policing approach was community-led and sensitive to the concerns of local residents.

In addition, social media became an increasingly important part of West Yorkshire Police and Bradford Metropolitan District Council's approach in 2015. In the run up to and on the day of the demonstration, a lot more social media was put out by the Council, by its partners, and by community representative to make sure that local residents had an accurate version of events and knew what was happening (*ibid.*). Moreover, the local Council tried to put out positive messages during such a divisive time and informed residents that the protest group had left the vicinity.

Finally, an additional part of the preparations in 2015 was the community response. The afternoon before the EDL demonstration took place, local campaign group Bradford Women for Peace held a vigil not too far away from the EDL's protest site (Wilde 13th November 2015a). This saw a number of notable local politicians and religious leaders come to 'stand together against any person or group who would seek . . . to stir up hatred and violence' (*ibid.*). It also involved the tying of green ribbons around the city centre. Moreover, carrying on the social media theme, people were encouraged to share messages of unity over the weekend, using the hashtag '#bradford4peace' (Wilde 13th November 2015b).

### **(b) Political responses**

Much of the political response to the EDL's final demonstration in November 2015 came from counter protestors as part of the local anti-fascist collection, 'We Are Bradford.' On the day of the demonstration, around one hundred counter protestors assembled near the EDL's cordon – promoting justice for the victims of local sex abuse that had spawned the EDL protest in the first place (Asian Express 26th October 2015). This was largely an exclusionary response designed to condemn the EDL's instrumentalisation of the issue for its own political gain. Such a counter demonstration was, however, largely positive. It was designed to be a 'peaceful unity rally' that also showed the local community's contempt for the crimes of fourteen Keighley men who had been charged with child sexual exploitation (*ibid.*).

The only other high-profile response by local politicians came from Naz Shah, MP for Bradford West, and then leader of the Council, David Green. They

supported and attended the previously mentioned peace vigil. Moreover, speaking at the event, Councillor Green stated that: 'This event is about what Bradford is about. It's about the fact that there are disagreements, there are challenges, but we have a way of dealing with them that involves us working together, peacefully in partnership' (Wilde 13th November 2015b). This response showed broad continuity with Green's previous actions against the EDL – trying to calm down the 'hype' associated with such protest events by displaying a separate positive message altogether.

### ***(c) Conclusion***

The EDL's third and final demonstration in Bradford was an inauspicious moment for the group. Spiralling into oblivion after the departure of its main leader two years previous, only a fraction of the demonstrators who had appeared at previous demonstrations turned up. Moreover, this was contrasted with the vibrant and sizeable community and policing presence that showed a mature response in the face of considerable provocation by the group. In terms of arrests, the quality and quantity of such measures by the police was not so much down to a poor policing response, but rather to the deteriorating state of the EDL as a far-right protest outfit. Fragmented, splintered and haemorrhaging members, only the most zealous and radical activists were motivated to turn up.

## **Bradford's second Britain First visit (13th February 2016)**

Like the EDL's final 2015 demonstration, Britain First's second visit to Bradford was not as high-profile as the first – but no less worrying. On 13th February 2016, thirty Britain First activists arrived unannounced in the Darley Street area of Bradford's city centre for a so-called day of action – handing out free copies of the group's newspaper to members of the public containing the headline, 'Ban Halal Slaughter' (Lowson 14th February 2016). Such was the fuss caused by the group visiting a mosque on its exit from the city that dispersal notices were issued by West Yorkshire Police and arrests of two local men were made as vehicles used by the right-wing extremist group were vandalised in Hamm Strasse and Lumb Lane (*ibid.*). The incident came after Britain First had promised an 'unprecedented' number of events in 2016 – with a specific focus on Bradford (Wright 15th February 2016).

### ***(a) Wider preparations***

Like in 2014, Britain First's second visit to Bradford largely caught local police, politicians and the local Council by surprise. Reports by West Yorkshire Police Superintendent, Damien Miller, suggest that the group was monitored and eventually asked to leave the city amid concerns that there might be disturbances between the activists and local residents (Lowson 14th February 2016). This, however, masked the reality that dispersal notices were issued when Britain First unfurled

a banner outside the Eastgate Mosque on their way out of the city. Moreover, the only high-ranking local official to respond publically to the incident was newly elected MP for Bradford West, Naz Shah. Shah, who had replaced George Galloway as Labour incumbent for Bradford West at the time of the 2015 General Election, called for a unified response in the wake of the visit (*Asian Express* 19th February 2016). In an interview with the author, she remembered her whereabouts when she received a call from West Yorkshire Police Chief Superintendent, Simon Atkins, about the incident: 'I was driving back from a meeting in Wakefield on the morning and I was thinking "oh my God."' (Shah 2017) Talking about recollections of the event, one senior Council officer spoke of the issues involved in policing such 'days of action': the police are '... kind of damned if they do and damned if they don't... how do you stop people from doing that... It's almost an impossible situation for the police and they need to balance the time to intervene against people's rights' (Bradford 8 2017). As one senior police officer charged with the policing response on the day adds: 'Ultimately and fundamentally the public of Britain have rights: freedom of speech, freedom of assembly. So as long as you are within those boundaries you have the opportunity to do that within a democratic society and, personally, I think that is right' (Bradford 9 2017).

### **(b) Political responses**

As one of the few high-ranking officials to be notified about the February 2016 incidents, Shah was at the forefront of local responses to the incident – and therefore constitutes the main focus of 2016 political responses. One of the first things that she did was to post a message on her official Facebook page, reassuring the local community that the incident had been 'managed and controlled effectively' by police and stating that Britain First's 'message of hate, difference and intolerance is not welcome in our great city of Bradford' (Shah 13th February 2016). Commenting on the post in an interview, Shah suggested that: '[t]here was more aggression aimed at my Facebook wall than there was in the town centre at the time' (Shah 2017). In addition, and in a newspaper interview with the *Asian Express*, Shah also welcomed the 'unified response' demonstrated by Bradford's residents – stating that: 'Bradford is and always will be a united city when faced with the likes of any types of hatred' (*Asian Express* 19th February 2016). Finally, in a House of Commons debate, Shah also raised the issue of broader challenges related to Britain First – suggesting that: '[In my constituency,] we need extra funding to tackle terrorism and we have extra vulnerabilities. We are also looking at integration, as just a few weeks ago Britain First came to my area' (HC Debate 24th February 2016).

### **(c) Conclusion**

While the 2016 Britain First visit in Bradford paled in terms of profile to the first incursion by the group two years previous, there were obvious concerns about

such a far-right group turning up unannounced in the city centre. As Shah comments: 'I suppose there is that worry about that minority and what *that* minority can lead to' (Shah 2017). In the end, however, the incident went off largely peacefully with only two arrests resulting from the visit. Once again, it highlighted the challenges involved in responding to a group like Britain First – posing serious concerns about community cohesion and safety but also making sure that they stayed within the law.

## Conclusion

Bradford has evolved quite considerably in the seventeen years since the riots. Economic development is well under way with the arrival of the Broadway shopping centre, and we can now talk of a new burgeoning Asian middle-class in the West Yorkshire city. When the EDL arrived in the late summer of 2010, the group was still, however, able to draw upon community polarisation that, while improved since the riots, was still a strong social dynamic in the area. Common to all approaches towards the EDL and Britain First in Bradford was, therefore, an understanding that the riots should never be repeated again. This helped galvanise the city's leaders behind a coherent public-order management response and gave them a narrative in which to express their opposition to anti-Islamic protest. Crucially, when the EDL returned in 2013 and 2015, lessons from the riots and the 2010 EDL protest were brought forward – making these more set-piece, high-profile protest events less fraught.

When we talk of the EDL's presence in Bradford, it is also important to consider subsequent waves of anti-Islamic activism in the West Yorkshire city. Britain First's arrival – a year after the EDL second major demonstration – provoked real shock amongst Bradfordian policymakers. Unfamiliar with the more vigilante-style hit-and-run tactics of this new far-right group, many had little experience to draw upon. The post-riots narrative of 'never again,' however, kicked in for both the 2014 and 2016 Britain First flash demonstrations – with serious local and national attention given to both events. This made sure that both were dealt with in a proportionate and sensible fashion – with only a small minority of local elites calling for a national ban on the group.

As we saw in Birmingham, however, political responses to anti-Islamic protest in Bradford have varied greatly and pivoted around the axis of exclusionist versus inclusionist approaches. The majority<sup>5</sup> advocated for the former and revolved around themes of a robust 'law and order' response and bids to ignore the group's presence as much as possible. As discussed in Chapter 2, while this is understandable, the key pitfall of such a position is that it re-enforces the outsider status of groups like the EDL and Britain First – preventing these groups from moderating their ideologies (Goodwin 2011: 23). More importantly, it only provides a short-term 'sticking plaster' response to the longer-term issues of social polarisation and political disengagement that has helped drive far-right activism in both Luton and Bradford over the past two decades.

In this respect, interventions by Council Leader David Green and former Bradfordian MP David Ward are particularly instructive. Both politicians showed well-thought-out responses to difficult local questions around public-order management, issues of race relations and how far you go in responding to groups like the EDL and Britain First. In Green's case, this was an attempt to shift the terms of the debate towards community rights in how you negotiate EDL demonstrations and actually engage with the concerns of white working-class constituents in his ward. In the David Ward's case, this also centred on previous work with local communities and striking a cautionary tone when thinking how best to intervene against anti-Islamic groups. These more sustained interventions, however, went beyond simply treating these groups as 'problematic' and engaged with the drivers of the groups' support, thus dealing with anti-Islamic protest from the *bottom up*. As we shall see in the following chapter, such inclusivism is neither always popular nor preferable – with the potential to stoke acrimony between lay and senior Council members.

## Notes

- 1 A Super Output Area is a geographic unit used by the UK Office for National Statistics in order to measure key social indices (such as deprivation and other neighbourhood statistics) consistently across time. Bradford has 310 of these, across which 27% of the population live in the most deprived SOAs in the UK (BMDC 2nd February 2017).
- 2 Incidentally, this was a big boost for the far-right parties in the UK, which had historically weak support in Northern towns (Husbands et al. 1980: 276).
- 3 See HMIC. (2011).
- 4 A joint venture of the anti-fascist group, Hope not Hate, as well as Bradford Women for Peace and the Bradford Council of Mosques.
- 5 These included Gerry Sutcliffe, George Galloway, Philip Davies, Khadim Hussain and Ian Greenwood.

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## **6 ‘Somewhere near the clock tower’**

### **Policy responses to the EDL and Britain First in Leicester**

What it did was to effectively close down the city for 24 hours; barriers were put around where there would be . . . [the EDL’s] static demonstration and across the road from them. . . . But it did certainly close down the city for a Saturday. And that certainly affected the way I thought about the appropriate response to the events in 2012.

Sir Peter Soulsby (2015), elected Mayor of Leicester,  
on the October 2010 Leicester EDL demonstration

[W]e dealt with the Britain First visit in such a low-key way. It wasn’t [a] Mosque invasion and it wasn’t particularly controversial. They were just stood there – giving some fairly unpleasant opinions, not inciting hatred, not breaking the law in that respect, and they were . . . gone.

A local Prevent officer (Leicester 1 2017), commenting on  
the May 2016 Britain First visits to Leicester

#### **Introduction**

Leicester is an important location for studying anti-Islamic protest and policy responses to it. In October 2010, the EDL held one of its most disorderly protests in the East Midlands City. Thirteen arrests were made on the day of the protest as demonstrators surged against police lines and tried to make a break for the (predominantly Muslim) Highfields area of the city. Moreover, in February 2012, the EDL returned to the city; this time, after a local teenager was attacked by four women of Somali origin. Significantly, however, key lessons were learnt by local elites about how to approach and manage the EDL’s presence. In 2012, the police shifted their tactics away from confrontation towards consultation. This resulted in a sharp decline in arrests – with zero protesters being taken into custody on the day of the EDL’s second major demonstration (Leicester Mercury 6th February 2012).

The presence of anti-Islamic protest in Leicester has not been without its difficulties, however. As will be highlighted later, the October 2010 and February 2012 demonstrations marked a particularly acrimonious period in Leicester politics. On both occasions, lay Councillors and senior Council officials failed

to see eye to eye on how to deal with the EDL's presence. For example, in 2010, there were disagreements about the ability of the EDL to have a platform in the city. Moreover, in 2012 and 2013, it was the ability of the EDL to march past the city's clock tower and through the city centre. This caused the most controversy amongst Leicester's political elite – with many local Councillors seeing it as an affront to what they perceived as the city's multicultural identity. Moving forward to the latest wave of anti-Islamic protest in the UK, Britain First also visited Leicester on two consecutive Saturdays in 2016. This again tested local elites in new ways as the anti-Islamic group turned up unannounced and positioned itself (again) next to the city's iconic clock tower.

This chapter will therefore examine how dealing with anti-Islamic protest has been both a time of public-order learning *and* political acrimony in Leicester. We will reflect on the curiosity of far-right protest in Leicester, and how this contributed to a 'surprise element' when the EDL first came to protest there in 2010. Finally, and like in the case of Birmingham, we will attempt to draw broader lessons from the Leicester case – suggesting that cohesiveness amongst elites is not a pre-requisite for a successful response. Furthermore, as long as there is a clear lead at the top and lessons are learnt from the past, it can be suggested that anti-Islamic protest can largely pass without major disruption or disorder within a particular locale on subsequent occasions.

## Context

### *(a) Deindustrialisation and diversity in Leicester*

Leicester is one of the largest and oldest cities in the East Midlands. Located near the River Soar and the National Forest, the city used to be a Roman military outpost before becoming a market town in the early modern period. The building of the Grand Union Canal and the Midland Main Line in the nineteenth century, however, aided the city to grow in prominence and Leicester gradually became famous for its engineering, shoe-making and hosiery during the Victorian era (Beazley 2011: 75). A sign of this boom period, Leicester's population increased from 68,000 in 1841 to 212,000 in 1861 (Leicester City Council n.d.). Moreover, it was at this time that the City's Memorial Clock Tower was built – a major landmark in Leicester.

Unlike other UK post-industrial cities, like Birmingham and Bradford, Leicester has not been hit as hard by the decline of its large industrial base in the early and mid-twentieth century. This was because of the diversity of local industry as well as a lack of reliance upon one primary industry, such as cloth-making (*ibid.*). In the late twentieth century, for example, metal fabrication was one of several economic outputs in the city – with electrical and precision engineering, printing, pharmaceuticals and food processing coming later (Lambert 2015). To give some idea of figures, in 1900, only 6,000 people were employed in engineering in Leicester. By 1939, the figure had risen to 13,500 and, by the 1950s, this jumped again to 29,000 (*ibid.*). This was mainly due to Leicester's wartime economy

during a time when munitions and armaments production spiked, both locally and nationally.

Moreover, engineering increasingly overtook trades in hosiery and boot-making as the twentieth century wore on – with changes in fashion, machinery and international competition rendering the latter increasingly obsolete (Beazley 2011: 117–131). The result has been a strikingly robust industrial sector in Leicester, with 12% of local employment now coming from manufacturing (Hirsch et al., May 2014: 10). Like elsewhere, however, Leicester’s local economy is still dominated by the services sector, with just under a third of total local employment being in health and education alone (*ibid.*). Above average employment in these areas is unsurprising, however, given that a large university and regional hospital are located within the city limits (*ibid.*).

As the economic complexion of Leicester has changed, so the city has also undergone a significant demographic transformation. During the pre-war period, for example, economic migrants from Ireland – as well as Jews fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe – came to Leicester. Moreover, post-World War II, this trend continued with workers from the West Indies arriving to seek employment in the city. Furthermore, from the 1960s onwards, citizens travelled from the Indian sub-continent to find work and a better quality of life. In the end, most moved to the Spinney Hill and Belgrave areas of the city and set up successful businesses and enterprises. A decade later, South Asians escaping persecution from the Ugandan dictator, Idi Amin, came to the East Midlands city. In addition, during the 2000s, Dutch Somalis settled in the city – fleeing from ‘a forced assimilation policy’ and anti-Muslim hostility linked to the rise of the Dutch far-right party, Pim Fortuyn (Evans-Pritchard 21st December 2004). Finally, and after the 2004 enlargement of the European Union, a sizeable number of migrants came from Eastern Europe to Leicester – with Polish residents forming 1.9% of the local population at the last Census (Leicester City Council 12th December 2012).

Such sustained flows of migration have transformed Leicester into one of the most diverse and multicultural cities in the UK. Over seventy languages are spoken, and some 48.8% of pupil’s mother tongues are those other than English (Paton 12th June 2014). Meanwhile, the 2011 Census found that 40.6% of local residents were either of Asian or mixed-race Asian heritage, with Indians (28%) forming the largest minority ethnic group (Jivraj and Finney October 2013). While Christianity remains the most practised religion in the city, 18.6% of the city’s residents registered themselves as followers of Islam at the 2011 Census – with adherents to Hinduism not too far behind (This Is Leicestershire 11th December 2012). The main places of worship for the city’s Muslims are the Leicester Central Mosque and the Masjid Umar Mosque, the former having to be guarded by the local Muslim community at the EDL’s October 2010 demonstration in the city (1mtzz 10th October 2010).

Such levels of diversity have not been without their challenges, however. In 1981, for example, a riot broke out in the Highfields area of the city. Coming as part of similar rioting elsewhere in the UK that summer, the Highfields riot centred on acute disadvantage and a lack of facilities for the area’s youth (*De*

*Montfort University* n.d.). Moreover, in August 2011, Leicester city centre was enveloped with rioting again – with seventy officers being sent out to deal with 100–150 teenagers and adults who were involved in disorder (BBC News 10th August 2011). Again, these were ‘copycat’ events with shops – rather than people of a different ethnic or religious background – being the main target for rioters. Notably, neither had the same communal impact as the riots Bradford in 1995 and 2001 (*ibid.*).

Indeed, it was widely suggested – in the wake of the earlier mill town riots in the summer of 2001 – that Leicester has been a success story in ‘how to do community cohesion’ (BBC News 29th May 2001), with individuals from the city’s minority religious and ethnic communities being actively integrated into the mainstream economic and political life of the city (Cantle 2001: 15). Crucially, levels of segregation are also not as high in Leicester as in other Cities in the UK (Casey December 2016: 44, 46). While the 2016 ‘Casey Review’ found that Leicester’s Latimer ward had the second highest concentration of minority faiths (p. 44), Leicester as a whole was ranked seventh on indices measuring ethnic segregation in schools. Added to a lack of social polarisation, there is a context of greater community cohesiveness in Leicester – with one survey suggesting 78% of respondents had a strong sense of identification with Leicester while 60% thought it was a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together (Osman September 2008).

### **(b) Right-wing extremism and Islamist extremism in Leicester**

One would, therefore, expect that right-wing and Islamist extremism hasn’t been an issue in Leicester. In terms of the former, this is a mixed picture, and calls into question the predominant narrative of harmonious race relations. Historically, for example, Leicester has seen its fair share of far-right groups and parties. During the 1970s, for example, National Front (NF) activism became an unwelcome feature of the local political scene – seeking to take advantage of those uncomfortable with the arrival of new South Asian migrants at the time. In 1979, for example, the NF organised a mass rally in the city (Leicester Mercury 18th April 2014). Moreover, in the 1976 local elections, the National Front came within sixty-one votes of victory in Leicester’s Abbey ward (Nash and Reeder 1993: 107). Finally, the NF also did well at the February 1974 General Election – managing to keep their deposits in Leicester East and Leicester West (*ibid.*: 117). In the past ten years, however, the UK far right has been relatively unsuccessful in mobilising Leicester’s residents to its cause. A BNP members list leaked in 2008 showed only eighty active members in the local party (Topping and Lewis 20th November 2008). Moreover, at the 2010 General Election, the BNP’s Parliamentary candidate for Leicester West, Gary Reynolds, only polled 6% of the popular vote (BBC News 7th May 2010).

Like historical and contemporaneous manifestations of far-right extremism, signs of Islamic extremism in Leicester have also been mixed. In the past fifteen years, there have been only two significant cases of Islamist extremism. In

January 2002, four Leicester residents were arrested on terrorism charges ‘as part of the largest police anti-terror operation in Britain since September 11[th 2001]’ (Millar 19th January 2002). These were, however, outsiders who had not lived in Leicester until just before their arrests. In April 2003, Brahim Benmerzouga and Baghdad Meziane were indicted for plans to make money, equipment and propaganda material available to Al-Qaeda (BBC News 1st April 2003). Again, both had entered Britain a short time prior to their arrest – suggesting that Leicester as a geographic location didn’t feature prominently on their path to radicalisation.

## **Part I: EDL demonstrations in Leicester**

### **(a) Leicester’s first EDL demonstration (9th October 2010)**

Bearing in mind the dominant narrative of inter-communal harmony and lack of an extreme Islamist milieu in Leicester, it seems curious that anti-Islamic groups would want to target the city. Moreover, and in contrast to Bradford, Leicester elites did not have a significant experience of rioting to draw from. On 9th October 2010, however, the EDL visited Leicester for the first time. About 2,000 of the group’s supporters turned out on the day to protest against the presence of Islamist extremism in the city. Menacingly, rumours circulated before the demonstration that some anti-Islamic activists wished to attack a mosque before marching into the Highfields area of Leicester (This Is Leicestershire 25th September 2010). On the day itself, the group was corralled at a protest site in the Humberstone Gate area of the city after being initially held at various muster points in Leicester (Treadwell 2014: 134). Despite Leicestershire police staging one of its biggest operations in twenty-five years, however, significant pockets of disorder broke out and thirteen arrests were made on a mixture of drugs, weapons and minor disorder offences. This happened as police fended off angry and frustrated protesters, some of whom had broken police lines and attacked a burger bar where Muslim residents were trapped inside (Standpoint 16th October 2010).

#### *(i) Wider preparations*

In the run up to the 2010 demonstration, retaining harmony was a key concern of local political elites in the city. As Ross Willmott (2015), then Leader of Labour Group, comments: ‘we worked very hard in Leicester to create a sense of security for all the different races and faiths [from the 1970s onwards], and people of different backgrounds and political views for that matter.’ In the end then, local elites entered the planning for the demonstration in 2010 wanting to safeguard this sense of harmony.

Like in Bradford, the first set of preparations was centred on reassuring – and establishing a good channel of communication – with the local Asian community. For example, in the weeks leading up to the demonstration, Leicester City Council set up a special email address to encourage local residents to message-in concerns they had about the forthcoming protest (This Is Leicestershire 18th

September 2010). It also involved a large dimension of getting messages out over local media outlets. Various messages were sent out by the police and civil society to stay away from the demonstration. For example, Chief Superintendent Rob Nixon wrote a letter to the *Leicester Mercury* a week before the EDL protest telling local residents 'not to come into Leicester to confront the demonstrators' (This Is Leicestershire 1st October 2010). Moreover, faith leaders also issued a warning to members of Leicester's Muslim community to try not to be drawn to the EDL's protest (This Is Leicestershire 28th September 2010).

In addition, there was also a more hands-on, 'behind-the-scenes' approach taken by known community contacts to mitigate the community impact of the EDL's presence. For example, text-messaging 'trees' were established in order to quell any rumours being stoked either by the group or Muslim community on the day of the demonstration (Leicester 1 2015). Another aspect of this community response was involving local NGO's, the local youth service and interfaith networks. This was in order to identify and target young people 'who were being whipped up into a frenzy' and 'to reduce them from boiling point to simmering' (*ibid.*). As one local official reflecting on the 2010 protest suggests: 'there was a real "butterflies-in-the-stomach" anxiety about the EDL coming' (*ibid.*).

On the day of the demonstration itself, the Council's Chief Executive, Sheila Lock, took a prominent position in managing the EDL's presence in Leicester. She took on a hybrid role – being both in the city but also part of Leicestershire Police's 'gold command' that oversaw the broader strategy for the day's policing (Grant 2015). For example, on the day of the demonstration, Lock gave a joint interview with Chief Superintendent Rob Nixon that was broadcast on the Council's YouTube channel. She also gave a radio interview to *Eava FM* (Coster 9th October 2010) and the BBC's local *Asian Network* on the day's events as well as a TV interview with ITV News (Leicestershire Police 9th October 2010). Such a forward role – nothing of which has been seen in Leicester or any other places since – drew heavy criticism from lay Councillors at the time of the October 2010 protest; as we will see in a moment. It did, however, provide concerted leadership at an uncertain time for the East Midlands city.

The second key preparation for the English Defence League demonstration was to apply for a ban against the group marching in the city. On the 25th September 2010, Councillors voted unanimously to veto the EDL's planned procession through the Highfield's area of Leicester (BBC News 25th September 2010). This was after a letter written to the Council from the Chief Constable of Leicestershire Police, Simon Cole, outlining his concerns about the impact of a public procession and the 5,000 protesters who were predicted to turnout for the 9th October event (*ibid.*). In the end, a blanket ban was successfully granted by the Home Office for the march on the Monday before the EDL were due to arrive (Taylor 4th October 2010). The reason given for this by the Home Office was based around the need to protect communities and public property from the protest group.

A third prong on the day of the demonstration was around 'myth-busting' and the factual reporting of events. Like in Bradford, one of the biggest risks on the day was rumours, myths and propaganda spreading (Grant 2015). The police tried

to combat this through their text-messaging services within the local community and their social media presence. Moreover, Conservative Councillor Ross Grant, who had been given the award for Online Councillor of the Year in 2010 by LGiU (LGiU 2010), retweeted the police’s messages as a way of rumour busting and reassuring the city’s Asian residents (Grant 2015). This allowed Grant to take an active role that didn’t involve becoming part of the counter demonstration (*ibid.*).

Another aspect of the preparations was the involvement of community and faith groups in and around the inaugural 2010 demonstration. For example, a peace vigil was held on the Friday before the demonstration – with peace ribbons being placed around the city (Lowles 1st October 2010). Moreover, the Bishop of Leicester held a special service in the city’s cathedral the day before the Saturday demonstration, and community events happened on the day of the demonstration itself to divert people away from Leicester city centre. In addition, there was also a community unity event held on the Sunday after the 9th October 2010 demonstration. Similar to the Bradford 2010 community event, this was organised by the anti-fascist collective Hope not Hate and involved community stalls, music and food. In the end, the community response was one of the very positive stories coming out of 2010. As local MP, Jon Ashworth, commented in his maiden speech at the time: ‘the people of Leicester [were] united in rejecting the EDL and what it stands for’ (HC Debate 8 June 2011).

Despite these preparations, trouble did rear its head on the day of the October 2010 Leicester protest. On the way from muster points to the protest site, EDL demonstrators smashed pub windows and tried to break out of the police containment area at Humberstone Gate East (Treadwell 2014: 134). Moreover, a separate set of protesters (who had been previously held in nearby Market Harborough) broke away from police lines and attacked a fast-food outlet. Meanwhile, when demonstrators got to the protest site, flares, smoke grenades and other missiles were thrown in confrontational clashes with riot police and anti-fascist counter protesters (*ibid.*). Similar to the EDL’s August 2010 Bradford protest, the EDL did not have the stewards who were present at later demonstrations. As Labour Councillor, Ross Willmott (2015), comments about 2010: ‘the police couldn’t cope with it. They weren’t ready, they hadn’t thought about [it].’

### *(ii) Political responses*

Responses by political elites to anti-Islamic protest in 2010 varied greatly – with some taking on exclusivist responses and a minority taking a more inclusivist reaction. In the run up to the 2010 demonstration, all three of Leicester’s MPs were quite active in campaigning against the EDL’s presence. For example, nearly a month before the EDL protest, Keith Vaz, MP for Leicester East, sponsored an Early Day Motion, which noted the 9th October demonstration and ‘recognise[d] that this rally has the potential to be provocative and to threaten race-relations and community cohesion’ (HC Early Day Motion 758 2010). The main reason was to spread awareness amongst other Parliamentarians about the unwelcome presence of anti-Islamic protest in Leicester, as well as to reinforce the views of his

constituents (Vaz 2015). In 2010, Vaz was certain that a ban was 'the only option available' – considering the 'potential violence, huge disruption and damage to community cohesion within Leicester' (*ibid.*).

Moreover, the city's three MPs released a joint statement two weeks before the protest, resolving that it would 'not affect Leicester's long and proud history of community cohesion' (This Is Leicestershire 25th September 2010). This, plus concerns about the potential for violence and 'huge disruption,' were at the forefront of local Parliamentarians' minds in 2010 (Vaz 2015). In addition, Leicester West's MP, Liz Kendall, further petitioned the Council to apply to the Home Secretary for a ban on the protest – commenting on Leicester's diverse communities and adding that the EDL's brand of racism and discrimination was simply 'not welcome' in the city (Kendall 23rd September 2010).

The main story in terms of political responses in 2010 was, however, one of friction between the city's Councillors and the Council's Chief Executive, Sheila Lock. For example, Ross Grant (2015), Conservative Councillor for Knighton, was critical of the Chief Executive's presence amongst the protests on the day – suggesting that Lock's call to be part of the 'gold command' distracted police attention and resources away from the main protest. Moreover, a whole group of Labour Councillors were disgruntled at the EDL being able to demonstrate in the first place – suggesting that the police 'seemed to be facilitating the EDL's day out' (Kitterick 2015) and that the Council was taking an 'apolitical' and 'managerial' stand on what they deemed to be a deeply political issue (Willmott 2015). For example, Ross Willmott (2015), Labour Councillor for Rushey Mead, suggested that the Council had 'broken a very long tradition of not having the EDL, or the BNP or the National Front in the heart of our city preaching their divisive views' (*ibid.*). In September 2002, for example, Willmott, then Leader of Leicester City Council, secured a ban by then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, on a march by the National Front intended to protest against what it saw as the problem of 'Militant Muslims' within the local area (The Daily Telegraph 24th September 2002).

In the end, a number of the Councillors on the Labour Group took a direct action approach to the EDL's presence. Andy Connelly, Patrick Kitterick and Ross Willmott (amongst others) joined the Unite Against Fascism counter protest. Connelly addressed the assembled crowds on the day, commenting that: 'It's important for us all that we don't leave our city to the EDL. Our trade unions and everyone need to stand together against the EDL. That's why this protest is so important' (Ruddick 12th October 2010). Moreover, Willmott also addressed the counter protest – saying: 'I'm proud to be here today, to stand here and show that our city belongs to all people, and this territory must not be ceded to some neo-fascist thugs. It is vital that we do not clear the city centre' (Unite Against Fascism 9th October 2010).

This is not to say that opinion about political responses to anti-Islamic protest was the same within the Labour Group. Ross Willmott, then Leader of the Labour Group, took the most robust line in 2010 – suggesting that all marches by anti-Islamic groups should be banned in the city. This was based on experiences of anti-racist campaigns during the 1980s. Moreover, another Labour Councillor,

Patrick Kitterick, was also of the robust conviction that members of minorities and people of all ethnic backgrounds should have been encouraged to come into Leicester city centre, while the EDL should be sent to an isolated spot outside of town in order not to ‘normalise’ the group’s presence. This was based on the attitude that by: ‘ignor[ing] the EDL, you legitimise it, you say it’s all OK and you just set yourself up for a growing problem’ (Kitterick 2015).

In contrast, though, Andy Connelly, another Labour Councillor, was more circumspect when it came to applying bans for marches – conceding in an interview that bans tend to lend publicity to anti-Islamic groups like the EDL and should only be implemented when the conditions suggest it is beneficial (Connelly 2015). He did, however, see the merit of confrontation as a way of opposing groups, like the EDL, and toed the Labour Group line that they were unhappy with the institutional response to the 2010 demonstration by the Leicester Council’s leadership and police. Moreover, as a Councillor, he believed that there was a special expectation on him to stand against the EDL ‘and their abhorrent views,’ and that its presence should be challenged so that progress towards its aims are impeded (*ibid.*).

Other political responses in 2010, at the more inclusivist end of the spectrum, came from Ross Grant. Contrary to the Labour Group, Ross, a Conservative Councillor, privately supported plans for the EDL to march in 2010. This private conviction was based on the belief that for such a group to be ‘just . . . stuck in one place and getting frustrated’ was a recipe for disaster (Grant 2015). Grant commented that the best course of action in the event of the EDL coming in 2010 would have been to ‘normalise it’ (*ibid.*). For Grant, this meant not attending a counter protest. In the end, however, he publicly voted with the Labour leadership for a march ban – suggesting that, despite his personal feelings, it was more important for Councillors to ‘all stand together’ and be united against the ‘EDL threat’ (*ibid.*).

### *(iii) Conclusion*

The EDL’s first visit to Leicester in 2010 was a fairly disruptive and acrimonious chapter in the city’s political history. Containment tactics used by police acted as a pressure cooker for EDL protesters and proved a major catalyst for the day’s disorder. Moreover, this wasn’t helped by dynamics inherent to the protest group on the day – with the EDL’s consumption of alcohol, lack of stewards and determination to storm a prominent Muslim area all key ingredients for disorder in the city. Overall, then, the impressions given by Leicester’s 2010 preparations and response was protection of harmonious race relations, but also one that potentially underestimated the presence of anti-Islamic protest. As Ross Willmott (2015) suggests: ‘the police couldn’t cope with it. They weren’t ready, they hadn’t thought about [it].’

Turning to political responses, 2010 was also a particularly acrimonious time for relations between the City Council’s Labour Group and Executive. For example, a sizeable number of Labour and non-Labour Councillors criticised the Council leadership’s handling of the event – suggesting that the then Chief Executive

took too much of a unilateral approach and shouldn't have allowed the group to protest at all. Whether this is fair or not is open to question, however – with the then Council Chief Executive, Sheila Lock, providing strong leadership at a difficult time for the city. There were, however, signs of inclusivism by the Conservative Group on the Council at the time of the 2010 demonstration – with Conservative Councillor Ross Grant proposing that the group's presence should be 'normalised.' Such were, however, minority views when compared with the more strident voices coming from sections of the local Labour party calling for a complete ban on the EDL's presence.

**(b) Leicester's second EDL demonstration (4th February 2012)**

The EDL's second demonstration in as many years in Leicester came at a key crossroads for the group. After a demonstration in Blackburn in April 2011, the EDL had splintered and spawned a more ideologically radical group, the 'North West Infidels.' Meanwhile, in December 2010, the Labour-controlled Council approved plans for a newly elected mayor, and in May 2011 veteran Labour politician Sir Peter Soulsby was duly elected with 55.3% of the popular vote (This Is Leicestershire 6th May 2011). This change in leadership, plus a weakened EDL, had two important effects on the group's February 2012 demonstration in Leicester. The first was on numbers; only 800 EDL demonstrators turned out to protest the issue of suspended sentences for four Somali women who had assaulted local teenager Rhea Page (The Daily Telegraph 6th December 2011). The second was on the level of disorder; no one was arrested during the second demonstration (BBC News 4th February 2012).

*(i) Wider preparations*

One of the key lessons learnt from 2010 and built upon in 2012, then, was the approach taken towards anti-Islamic protest by the Council. This was brought in by a change of leadership. Sir Peter Soulsby, a veteran of Leicester politics and the newly elected mayor, was adamant that the EDL would not 'effectively close down the City for 24 hours' (Soulsby 2015). For example, Soulsby was determined to continue 'as far as [he] could with business as usual' on the day of the demonstration and to keep 'physical confrontation [between the EDL and counter-protesters] to a minimum' (*ibid.*). In the end, the chief outcomes of this were: a) allowing the group to march, and b) a carefully choreographed route that would create as little disturbance as possible. As Soulby suggests, this was a 'very well-chosen route' that didn't come close to a Muslim-majority area and therefore robbed the anti-Islamic group from encountering the city's Asian population and 'having a punch up' (*ibid.*).

Building on this, there was also a major shift in policing tactics in 2012. While in 2010 a heavy-handed and largely prohibitive style of policing took place that sought to contain the activities of the EDL, in 2012, this gave way to a more low-key, non-confrontational style of public-order policing that allowed the group to

flow more freely through the city (Treadwell 2014: 128). Like in Birmingham, two examples of this new, softer exclusionary approach in 2012 were better dialogue and agreement with the EDL as well as a more neutral and softer stance on the day itself (*ibid.*: 134). Moreover, EDL protesters were kept well away from flashpoint areas and were not subject to the same ‘kettling’ tactics, which had caused much of the disorder two years previous. According to one scholar (Treadwell 2014), this was also symptomatic of a broader, national shift in how anti-Islamic protest was policed between 2010 and 2012 – and was informed by the rationale that police confrontation only unifies a crowd. In order to avoid this, therefore, a more differentiated and gentle tack was adopted in Leicester in 2012 (*ibid.*: 128).

This change in tack by politicians and the police did not, however, mean that the learning from 2010 was completely jettisoned. One key lesson that was brought forward from 2010 was the use of community networks and contacts to myth-bust and reassure the local Muslim community about any anxieties they had. For example, text-messaging networks were reactivated in order to get ‘quick-time’ counter-messaging out as soon as rumours arose (Leicester 1 2015). Moreover, like in Bradford, interventions around young men at risk of getting involved in violent disorder were again put in place – with youth workers, NGOs and the local youth service all called to ‘keep . . . a lid on community tensions’ and keep an eye on individuals who would potentially seek ‘some kind of reprisals against the EDL’ (*ibid.*). In addition, the active communications strategy in 2010 was also rolled out again and replicated. Designed to keep the local community informed and reassured about preparations in the run up to demonstrations, for example, Soulsby appeared in a number of YouTube videos. These happened before the 2012 event and showed Soulsby alongside Chief Superintendent Rob Nixon, outlining his wish for there to be ‘business as usual’ and, in a sign of single-loop learning (Argyis and Schön 1978), emphasised that he was drawing lessons from the disruptive 2010 experience (Leicester City Council 24 January 2012, 30 January 2012, 3rd February 2012).

Moreover, in the week leading up to the demonstration, Soulsby gave a final video in which he picked out ‘rumour-busting’ as a key weapon that could be used against the EDL (Leicester City Council 3rd February 2012), gave a broadcast interview with a local radio station (EAVA FM 1st February 2012), and wrote a letter to the *Leicester Mercury* outlining final preparations and decisions on day’s events (Leicester Mercury 4th February 2012). When interviewed, Soulsby suggested his presence in the city’s media was not to increase his reputation (though this certainly played a part), but informed by his conviction that ‘there is an expectation and a mandate [for a city mayor] . . . to articulate the feelings of the people of the city’ (*ibid.*). This level of sustained engagement showed how seriously the Council leadership took the EDL’s presence in the city on a second occasion and replicated Sheila Lock’s efforts of two years previous.

#### *(ii) Political responses*

While Leicestershire Police embarked on a major shift in their approach towards the EDL, the return of anti-Islamic protest to Leicester in 2012 did not see much

of a change in terms of political responses – with only the content of the acrimonious comments differing. For example, Ross Willmott publicly criticised Sir Peter Soulsby's decision to allow the EDL to march in 2012. Unconvinced by the police's tactical change, Willmott took to the *Leicester Mercury* to suggest that the EDL would be 'effectively take control of these streets' and that disorder could break out at any point along the group's allocated route (*Leicester Mercury* 1st February 2012). Moreover, the ability of the EDL to march past the city's Memorial Clock Tower was also widely picked up upon. Many Labour Councillors saw it as an affront to the multicultural identity of the town – suggesting that the group should have been placed in a more 'obscure' location instead of a key central and symbolic location within the city (Kitterick 2015). As Patrick Kitterick (2015) elaborates: 'it's the key landmark . . . if you try to direct anybody to anywhere in [the city] . . . you'll say, "I'll meet you by the Clock Tower."'

Like in 2010, a number of Councillors on the Labour Group attended the UAF counter march on the day of the demonstrations to voice their dissent. Patrick Kitterick, Andy Connelly, Ross Willmott and newly elected Labour Councillor Lucy Chaplin all attended the UAF counter protest. In the run up to the demonstration, Kitterick released a joint statement with other Councillors from the Castle ward of Leicester, saying that he was 'appalled and ashamed at the decision to allow the racist neo-Nazi English Defence League to march through the city centre past the Clock Tower' (*Leicester UAF* 1st February 2012). Moreover, Willmott repeated his criticism of Soulsby's decision in the local press – suggesting that the group should have been restricted to a static protest outside of the city centre (*Leicester Mercury* 8th February 2012).

Political responses to anti-Islamic protest in 2012 were not solely of the acrimonious type, however. Ross Grant, for example, decided not to respond to the EDL's presence. With little to pick up on in social media, he took the approach of a 'non-response' – reasoning that if you 'actually don't say anything . . . nobody would even [have] noticed [which] would be a good result' (Grant 2015). Moreover, Keith Vaz, MP for Leicester East, decided in 2012 to focus his interventions not on the group itself, but on the cost to the public purse. For example, he made a number of representations to Press, Parliament and the then Policing Minister, Nick Herbert, about the fact that Leicester had to foot an £800,000 bill for the protest. This was to make sure that cuts in policing budgets didn't 'bite even deeper' (Vaz 2015). Like in Luton in 2011, this intervention was successful, and the City of Leicester was reimbursed £670,000 of the total cost.

### *(iii) Conclusion*

Both Leicestershire Police and the Leicester City Council faced a much diminished anti-Islamic presence in 2012. Having splintered in April the previous year, the EDL did not have the basis to mount the same public-order threat as when it had come two years previous. This did not, however, stop a thorough-going shift in tactics by the police and local Council – contributing to a deflated set of arrest figures on the day. Like in Birmingham in 2011, the 2012 demonstration, for example, saw the police offer a far more low-key approach that meant that

the group’s presence in Leicester was short and transitory. Moreover, Sir Peter Soulsby’s decision to allow the EDL to march helped funnel the group through a route that would cause as little as disruption as possible. As Keith Vaz MP (2015) commented: ‘The police did a stunning job . . . it was handled with supreme professionalism.’

Like in 2010, however, tensions between the local Labour Group and the Council leadership continued. This time it was around the subject of an anti-Islamic group marching past the city’s central Memorial Clock Tower. Many of those disgruntled by the decision turned up on the day to demonstrate their disapproval about the EDL occupying the symbolic heart of the city and a key place associated with Leicester’s multicultural identity. There were, however, some signs of discontinuity between political responses to anti-Islamic protest in 2012, when compared with 2010. For example, the cost of hosting repeated EDL demonstrations in Leicester became more prominent. Moreover, the city’s only Conservative Councillor decided not to respond to the group’s presence in 2012. In addition, Lucy Chaplin, then a newly elected Labour Councillor, protested at the UAF demonstration on the day of the 2012 EDL demonstration. While, therefore, the police had become better at dealing with the ‘threat’ of anti-Islamic protest, acrimony still existed on the exact methods used to go about this.

### *(c) Leicester’s third EDL demonstration (1st June 2013)*

The EDL’s third and final visit to Leicester came less than eighteen months after the second, and was a very different protest event compared to the two EDL demonstrations prior. Coming after the Woolwich attacks in late May 2013, one hundred anti-Islamic activists arrived to lay a wreath for the executed soldier, Lee Rigby, and to walk from the city’s Memorial Clock Tower to Victoria Park. In a sign of lessons learnt by Leicestershire Police, only a dozen police officers visibly marshalled the EDL during the June 2013 protest – with a number of police vans held in reserve in case there was trouble between group’s protesters and the hundred or so anti-fascist demonstrators in attendance (Leicester Mercury 3rd June 2013). Fortunately, there was not a return to the scenes of October 2010 – with the wreath laying and walk passing off largely without incident (ITV News 1st June 2013). The group’s 1st June mobilisation was one of a number of similar events happening in the East Midlands and across the country in the wake of the Woolwich terror attacks – a period that had seen an appreciable uptick in EDL support (from 25,000 to 75,000) and anti-Muslim attacks (up 373%) (Goodwin 23rd May 2013; Feldman and Littler July 2014: 3).

#### *(i) Wider preparations*

The rather subdued outcome and course of events at Leicester’s final EDL demonstration, however, belied the heightened local context around the protest event. Before the demonstration, there was intelligence received by local law enforcement and counter-terrorism officers that it would be a ‘huge demonstration’ – with

anti-Islamic protestors converging on Leicester from a number of nearby local towns (Leicester 1 2015). Moreover, the EDL's choice to walk past Leicester's Memorial Clock Tower was again politically contentious. Police were also not sure whether 500, 100 or 50 people would turn up at the protest event (*ibid.*). As one local official expressed: 'we were fearful of a repeat of what happened before [in 2010]' (*ibid.*).

In terms of policing and the local authority response in 2013, however, things were far more low-key when compared to previous years. Like in 2012, Leicestershire Police allowed the group to march and issued a proportionate response tailored to the group's much diminished presence. As a police spokesman noted before the demonstration:

We will adopt a low-key policing style, with appropriate contingencies in place. We do not expect either event to disrupt normal business in the city centre, and encourage people planning to visit the city centre on Saturday to continue with those plans.

(Fagan 31st May 2013)

Moreover, the response by the City Council was also less heightened than before – simply because, according to one local official: local people and officials had got over the 'initial anxiety of "oh, what does this mean"' (Leicester 1 2015). In 2013, however, the same community networks used in 2010 and 2012 were remobilised, with more of an emphasis around rumour and myth-busting than community reassurance and safety. The day therefore turned out to be 'a bit of a damp squib . . . because [other post-Woolwich EDL demonstrations] were happening all over the country. It wasn't a national march' (*ibid.*).

### *(ii) Political responses*

Like in 2010 and 2012, however, this 'surface calm' contrasted with the political responses in 2013. Again, Patrick Kitterick – along with two other Castle ward Councillors – challenged the City Council's decision to allow the march to go ahead and for an anti-Islamic group to walk through the city centre (Fagan 31st May 2013). In a statement, they suggested that 'the proposed march . . . has nothing to do with paying tribute to Drummer Lee Rigby and everything to do with dividing our city' (*ibid.*). Adding to this, a spokesman for Leicestershire's Federation of Muslim Organisations told a local paper that: 'It is right to pay respects to Drummer Lee Rigby but you have to ask whether it is necessary to march through the city centre' (*ibid.*).

### *(iii) Conclusion*

In summary, then, the EDL's third and final demonstration was a far more localised affair compared to the two larger protest events that had preceded it. With media reports stressing that nobody outside of Leicestershire was attending the

event (*ibid.*), the day’s march only mustered one hundred EDL protesters. Partially to do with the diminished status of the EDL as an organisation, but mainly to do with the learning curve that Leicestershire police had been on since 2010 and 2012; responses by the police and local authority were on a much smaller scale than had been the case previously. Moreover, the local authority simply re-established community networks that had been so crucial in stopping the spread of rumours at previous demonstrations. In terms of political responses, we also saw slight continuity with 2012 – with Patrick Kitterick and others voicing their complaints at the Council leadership and the police’s decision to allow the event to go ahead; a softer form of exclusion.

## **Part II: Britain First demonstrations in Leicester**

Three years after the EDL’s final visit to Leicester, Britain First arrived largely unannounced in the East Midlands city on 21st May 2016. Provocatively campaigning to take Britain out of the ‘EU empire super state ruled from Brussels by unelected foreigners’ (Britain First 22nd May 2016), twenty of the group’s activists set up stall right next to the city’s iconic clock tower – by then a key symbol of struggle between anti-fascists and anti-Islamic protestors in Leicester (York 21st May 2016). Due to a largely hostile reception from anti-fascists and members of the public, however, the group was forced to quickly abandon its ‘day of action’ – retreating to cars under the escort of several police officers. Unperturbed by their initial reception, Britain First returned to Leicester a week later to distribute the group’s newspapers and leaflets – giving voters a choice between the ‘freedom’ of leaving the EU and the ‘slavery’ of staying (York 28th May 2016). Again, however, the group encountered a larger, more hostile crowd – with their stall being tipped over and Britain First’s leader, Paul Golding, being arrested on breach of bail conditions relating to an earlier ‘Christian Patrol’ in Luton.

### **(a) Wider preparations**

Policing preparations were largely absent from Britain First’s initial visit to Leicester. Apart from several officers assembling after the group were met with confrontation, there was little in the way of police presence. As one local Prevent official comments:

So, in terms of the policing in Leicester, in terms of the first week, there were no real policing preparations done. Certainly, from a Prevent point view, we didn’t have any involvement at all in the first visit. That . . . was purely a police response. When things started to get out of hand.

(Leicester 1 2017)

Britain First’s second visit was very different, however. Cognisant of the group publicly announcing that it would return to Leicester, local agencies were able to put together a more tailored response on the second occasion. In terms of the policing response, then, a larger number of officers were mobilised to cope with

the high-profile nature of the second visit – classified by one Leicestershire Police spokesperson as a ‘peaceful protest’ (Sims 28th May 2016). Moreover, local Prevent officials were working in the background with members of the local Muslim community to continue the good work established in response to the EDL. This involved ‘reassurance visits’ to community contacts and trying to keep the situation from ‘boiling over in advance of [Britain First’s] visit’ (Leicester 1 2017). Counter-messaging here was also key – telling residents (not unproblematically) ‘don’t get involved, don’t go into town, try and have a say and have a pop, because if you do cross the line yourselves, the police will be duty bound to arrest you as well’ (*ibid.*).

### *(i) Political responses*

Again, and proportionate to the size and scale of Britain First’s initial mobilisation in 2016, there was a negligible response by local politicians to the group’s 21st May visit. Apart from anti-fascist protestors (Unite Against Fascism 23rd May 2016) and the local branch of the Socialist Workers Party (RT 22nd May 2016), there were no public statements by senior ranking local politicians on the issue. As one interviewee stated: ‘they would have largely passed me by if it hadn’t been reported, either in the media or on social media’ (Grant 2017). In contrast, however, there were quite high-profile reactions to the 28th May visit. This was largely facilitated by the presence of the city’s elected Mayor, Sir Peter Soulsby, and his Assistant City Mayor, Councillor Manjula Sood MBE, who were in the city centre at the time to support a community event nearby. Such responses were quite divergent, however, and require some explanation.

With regards to Peter Soulsby, his soft exclusivist response was quite apparent. Walking up to Paul Golding, Soulbsy warned the leader of the group that: ‘This is a multi-racial city and you are not welcome here. I have a mandate from 77,000 voters and I say on their behalf, leave Leicester’ (Leicester Mercury 28th May 2016). In continuity with his response in 2012, Soulsby didn’t go as far as advocating banning the group – stating that: ‘What has happened with the response they have had from the people of this city has been a far more powerful rejection than banning them’ (Martin 31st May 2016).

While still condemning the group’s presence, however, his Assistant City Mayor, Councillor Manjula Sood MBE, was far more inclusivist in her response to encountering the group. Stressing the importance of dialogue, she approached one of the Britain First’s activists and asked them: ‘your skin looks very tanned have you been on holiday?’ (Sood 2017). When the activist responded with a ‘yes,’ Sood responded by saying: ‘So what’s your problem then? Why don’t you like people with dark skin?’ (*ibid.*). In an interview, Sood’s line of reasoning for this questioning was based on concerns about the anti-immigrant stance of the group – specifically in relation to Muslims (*ibid.*). Moreover, it was also characteristic of her overall approach of dialogue first, condemnation second – listening to what the group had to say before countering any of their arguments.

A third local politician who shared strong views in combatting the presence of Britain First in May 2016 was Leicester’s Assistant Mayor for Strategic Partnership and Change, Councillor Abdul Osman. Commenting on the groups presence

in interview, he stated that Britain First ‘have a very negative impact in terms of community cohesion . . . it’s all about stopping someone from practicing what they believe in’ (Osman 2017). He believed that it was the responsibility of any high-ranking politician in a cosmopolitan city, like Leicester, to ‘take responsibility to safe guard its citizens in relation to [social cohesion]’ (*ibid.*). Adopting the same hard exclusionary approach as the mayor, Councillor Osman states that ‘it is only right stance to take not to welcome any far right or extreme ideological group who wants to protest or to march in our cities’ (*ibid.*). This was based on experiences of the National Front’s aforementioned presence in Leicester during the 1970s, with a teenage Osman being a witness to ‘all those marches in local parks and as far as Victoria Park, which is not far from the city centre’ (*ibid.*).

Finally, and in direct contrast to more direct exclusionary responses, Leicester’s only Conservative Councillor, Ross Grant, took the step of issuing a ‘non-response’ in relation to the events of May 2016. Similar to his responses to the 2012 EDL demonstration, Grant posits that: ‘if the response had been less prominent then the whole thing would have passed off without anyone even knowing’ (Grant 2017). His ‘no oxygen’ stance stands at odds with many other local politicians but was based on the rationale that ‘if there are more of them and they’re doing more significant events you kind of up your response’ (*ibid.*).

### *(ii) Conclusion*

Coming prior to 2016’s all-important Brexit vote, Britain First’s two visits to Leicester that year provoked a large-scale response, both from local residents and from senior politicians. This was mainly directed at the group’s second visit and picked up upon dividing lines established in Chapter 2 between soft exclusionary, inclusionary, and ‘non-responses.’ While the first visit largely caught local policy-makers off-guard, then, the second saw a more concerted response being exerted by practitioners, the result of which led largely to an embarrassment of Britain First – with headlines asserting that the anti-Islamic group had been chased out of town (York 28th May 2016). Not all were, however, happy with such a large-scale response. As one local interfaith worker tells the author:

I think [Britain First] genuinely do thrive where there’s a big crowd against them and they’re able to play the victim card. [T]he best way of safeguarding people from their poison is to just to be as far away from it as possible and let the authorities do what they do.

(Leicester 3 2017)

## **Conclusion**

Leicester presents itself as a curiosity when studying anti-Islamic protest. Here is a town with (apparently) harmonious relations between different ethnic and religious communities, but which still has played host to a number of significant EDL and Britain First demonstrations over the past nine years. Previously bereft

of any far-right activism since the mid-1970s, the EDL's presence was therefore somewhat of an unexpected surprise for local elites in October 2010 – when the EDL decided to come in large numbers and target the predominantly Muslim Highfields area of the city. As, Ross Willmott (2015), a Labour Councillor at the time, commented before: 'the police couldn't cope with it. They weren't ready, they hadn't thought about [it].'

In a sense, the surprise nature of the EDL's presence fed into the reactive public-order policing response in 2010 and therefore contributed to a breakdown in order on the day of the protest. For example, the banning of the EDL's presence meant that a containment strategy had to be used which arguably ramped up tensions amongst demonstrators. Moreover, the staggering of protesters allowed late-comers to enter the (largely Muslim) Highfields area of the city – creating a twin focus for the police, and therefore splitting their attention. This, plus the group's determination to access Highfields and a lack of stewarding, created a 'perfect storm' for public disorder in 2010. When it came to Leicester in 2012 and 2013, therefore, key public-order management lessons were learnt and the anti-Islamic group was allowed to march through the city. A change in policing tactics towards a more consultative response, then, helped keep public disorder at a low-level and led to a much more peaceful protest event in comparison to October 2010. Such lessons were emulated in May 2016, when the group's successor, Britain First, came to town.

While the presence of anti-Islamic protest in Leicester has led to good policing outcomes (no disorder, zero arrests), the advent of anti-Islamic protest has also marked a particularly poisonous period in the city's politics that has not been seen in any of the other cases under examination. Around each of the demonstrations in Leicester, there were tensions and disunity within the Council chamber about: first, the EDL's ability to demonstrate at all; second, the EDL's ability to march; and third, the sort of counter-tactics that should be used against these groups. The admittedly small, but significant, voices of some Councillors on the city's Labour Group, for example, disliked the Council Executive for giving the EDL 'a platform' in 2010. While in 2012 and 2013, it was the EDL's ability to march past the clock tower, seen as the symbolic heart of the city and part of Leicester's multicultural identity, which raised eyebrows. Finally, in 2016, it was the use of multiple exclusivist, inclusivist or 'non-response' measures that generated acrimony in relation to Britain First's large-scale arrival in the East Midlands city. Sound management of anti-Islamic protest has therefore come at the cost of harmonious political relations in Leicester.

Such acrimony has dominated – but not completely eclipsed – other political responses to the EDL and Britain First in the city, however. Councillors on the Labour Group have still found time to oppose the anti-Islamic group through participating in and speaking at EDL counter demonstrations organised by the UAF. Moreover, there have been a wider variety of political responses apart from the hard-core of Labour 'dissidents' on the City Council (Soulsby 2015). For example, local Labour Members of Parliament have stuck to a more legal-liberal exclusionary route – pulling Parliamentary, media and governmental levers to

try to petition against EDL protests and their related financial costs. In addition, Leicester’s sole Conservative Councillor has also taken a more pragmatic and cautious angle – agreeing with Labour colleagues to ban the EDL in 2010 to preserve unity and offering a ‘non-response’ to the EDL in 2012 and Britain First in 2016 in order not to publicise the groups’ presence. Added to this, the response of Manjula Sood can also be posited: putting dialogue ahead of confrontation when dealing with these groups.

In sum, then, this chapter provides an important counterfactual when managing and responding to anti-Islamic protest. The Leicester case suggests that you do not necessarily need a cohesive Council response in order to successfully intervene when anti-Islamic protest comes to town. Instead, a clear lead at the top of the Council and the ability of both local politicians and the police to learn public-order management lessons of previous mobilisations can be a vital building block when managing this type of protest. While the former does help, the latter is sufficient grounds for dealing with anti-Islamic protest and the learning curve that it involves. Moreover, in some senses, the disagreements between local Councillors are better than unquestioning loyalty – providing a ‘check’ on the Council leadership and highlighting how symbolic, historical stances against the far right play an important role in shaping responses. It is to this question of historical memory to which we now turn – examining responses to EDL and Britain First demonstrations in the all-important context of the East End of London.

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## 7 Anti-Islamic protest in London's East End

### Policy responses to the EDL and Britain First in Tower Hamlets

East London has always been a hotspot between the far-left and the far-right and between community groups and those who are presenting simplistic extremist arguments and solutions to the complex problems of society. The EDL are the latest manifestation of racist organisations.

Jim Fitzpatrick (2014), MP for Poplar and Limehouse, on mobilisations by the far-right and far-left in Tower Hamlets

[H]aving said that we'd barely noticed [Britain First's initial 'Christian Patrols']. They obviously were playing this on a media platform to try and create the impression that there was greater activity than there was and we took them very very seriously.

Tower Hamlets' elected mayor, John Biggs (2017), when discussing the profile of Britain First's activism there

#### Introduction

Tower Hamlets is a crucial area for studying far-right (and anti-fascist) activism in the UK. In 1936, the East London borough laid host to the 'Battle for Cable Street' where 100,000 anti-fascist demonstrators blockaded a march by Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists. Moreover, this reputation extended into the early 1990s; when the area hosted scuffles between Anti-Nazi League and British National Party (BNP) activists as the BNP tried to secure an electoral victory in the Isle of Dogs area of Tower Hamlets. The EDL's and Britain First's most recent attempts to demonstrate in the borough in 2011, 2013, 2014 and 2016, therefore, added another wave of far-right activity to the already storied history of anti-minority activism in the area – albeit this time with a more anti-Islamic flavour.

Tower Hamlets is also a crucial area for studying anti-Islamic activism itself and political responses to it. In the past nine years, the borough has gained a reputation for hosting some of the most high-profile and disorderly demonstrations ever recorded by the EDL and Britain First. For example, after a fairly low-scale and peaceful presence by the EDL in June 2009 and a cancelled demonstration the following year, action by the EDL escalated in September 2011 and September 2013 – when an estimated 1,000 and 500 of the group's protesters turned out, respectively, to highlight the problematic nature of 'radical Islamism' in Tower

Hamlets. Moreover, Britain First piloted its controversial ‘Christian Patrols’ in the borough. These provocative actions led to some of the highest arrest counts witnessed at a single far-right protest – with nearly 300 counter protesters arrested at the EDL’s September 2013 demonstration.

In this chapter, we will examine this latest wave of far-right activism and ask: how have local politicians and the Metropolitan Police Service responded to it? We will focus on demonstrations by the EDL and Britain First over the past nine years – showing the problematic nature of counter demonstrations and violent confrontation with regards to these groups. What we will find is that, while political responses to the group have been broadly successful, the operational policing response has not. As we shall see, this has not been a result of the lack of public-order management preparations by the Metropolitan Police Service. Instead, it has been as a direct result of local youths and militant anti-fascists from the UK’s Anti-Fascist Network being provoked – leading to high arrest counts and violent confrontations on Tower Hamlets’ streets.

## Context

### *(a) Deindustrialisation and diversity in the East End*

The East London borough of Tower Hamlets grew to prominence in the nineteenth century as a key naval hub. Located next to the River Thames, several docks were created in the area to service trade and import goods – such as wine, wool and tobacco – from India and the Caribbean during the early nineteenth century. As a result of this heightened economic activity and the arrival of Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe, the area’s population quickly expanded – experiencing a four-fold increase from just under 143,000 residents in 1801 to around 580,000 in 1891 (Kerrigan 1982: 40). Moreover, this prosperity continued well into the twentieth century. By 1938, 42% of British imports passed through the area (Eade 2000: 132). To this day, the docks stand testament to the area’s mercantile past – with the West India, Millwall, London and St. Katherine’s still keeping their namesakes.

Added to this rich naval heritage, Tower Hamlets was also host to an equally vibrant political and social scene during the late nineteenth century and the twentieth century. For example, the borough hosted the ferment that would lead to the creation of the Communist Party of Great Britain in the 1920s – with the likes of Lenin, Stalin and Rosa Luxemburg all attending conferences in the area. Moreover, the prominent suffragette, Sylvia Pankhurst, formed a breakaway East London Suffragettes movement in order to encourage activism by working-class women in the East End. Looking even further back, William Booth founded the Salvation Army in the area in August 1878 – offering up a unique blend of Christian mission and humanitarian aid to help the poor of Tower Hamlets. Finally, the East End also played a key role in establishing the trade union movement in England – with the 1889 London Dock Strike being one of the largest of its time.

Despite this early economic, political and social success, Tower Hamlets ran into economic difficulties from the mid-twentieth century onwards. This was chiefly due to the decline of trade from the Empire and the area's inability to keep up with modern developments in the shipping trade. For example, colonial trade in London halved during the 1960s (*ibid.*), and by 1967, only carpet traders used the large warehouses that had been previously stored imported goods (Port Cities London n.d.). Moreover, the advent of containerisation during this period meant that most modern ships could not venture as far as Tower Hamlet; meanwhile, international competition saw an end to the area's thriving rag trade (Cox 2013: 393).

In the 1980s and under the leadership of then Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Heseltine, therefore, the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) redeveloped the area. The vision was to transform an industrial and maritime centre into a twenty-first century 'water-city' (Eade 2000: 133). By 1991, the LDDC had completed its job, and turned what had become a relatively sleepy backwater into the UK's major financial hub – with the likes of Barclays, HSBC, Citigroup and Morgan Stanley all setting up their UK headquarters in the newly created Canary Wharf financial district. This was typical of London's broader transition from an 'imperial capital' to a 'global city' during this period (*ibid.*).

In the shadow of dock cranes and warehouses, Tower Hamlets and the East End has, however, always been an area of great wealth but also of chronic social deprivation and poverty. During the nineteenth century, for example, the East End 'rapidly expanded into a vast working-class area' (*ibid.*: 123) and became synonymous with the overcrowding, disease and criminality that now permeates popular culture. With a frequent turnover of seafarers and the presence of expensive and desirable goods, widespread criminality was the norm in the Victorian East End – with theft and prostitution amongst the borough's key vices. Moreover, many of the poor people of London were forced to move to the area as a result of government-sponsored slum clearance programmes. For the area's (mainly poor) residents, this resulted in rampant overcrowding and squalid living conditions that became the subject of Victorian novels by the likes of Dickens, Mayhew and Doré.

To this day, social disadvantage is still a large problem in the borough. Despite housing elite banking firms, most of Tower Hamlet's population still lead a deprived and overcrowded existence. For example, the borough has the second highest rate of unemployment in London (New Policy Institute n.d.a) while child poverty is ten times larger when compared with London's most prosperous districts (New Policy Institute (n.d.b)). Tower Hamlets is also ranked amongst local authorities with the highest number of areas described as 'most deprived' in England (Rogers 29th March 2011). Moreover, older pathologies still persist. In a 2007 report for London's Council, Tower Hamlets was identified as an area where 'disadvantage in income, health, housing and crime' were prevalent, as well as recording one of the highest population densities in London – with housing a real and pressing issue for the borough's 254,100 residents (Hill 19th September 2014). As the

UK Polling Report profile for the borough's Poplar and Limehouse constituency highlights: 'The seat now contains incredible extremes, from extreme deprivation in the north . . . to the gleaming skyscrapers and exclusive dockside developments of Canary Wharf in the South' (Wells May 2010).

Added to this (and like other towns and cities in this study), Tower Hamlets has also seen numerous waves of migration over the past four centuries. As early as the sixteenth century, for example, Huguenots started arriving in the borough. Leaving the towns of northern France, they continued their silk-weaving in the area – making Spitalfields 'world famous for its figured silk and brocade' (Eade 2000: 126). More significantly, Ashkenazi Jews fleeing persecution in Eastern Europe sought refuge in the borough during the late nineteenth century (Tartari 2013: 112). As a result, bakeries, jewellery shops and synagogues became key elements in the borough's built environment. This was until prosperous second and third generation Jewish settlers moved to London's outer suburbs in the early 1970s (Eade 2000: 127). Moving forwards in time, the borough was transformed again when another wave of migration occurred during the 1950s and 1970s. This time, citizens of the Indian sub-continent came to Tower Hamlets (mainly from the newly created state of Bangladesh) and settled in the Brick Lane area of the borough. This again saw another marked transition in the area's built environment as Bangladeshi textile workers turned bakeries into curry houses, jewellery shops into sari emporiums and synagogues into mosques.

These two main waves of migration also transformed the East End borough into one of the most diverse areas in the Greater London region. At the 2011 Census, for example, people of an 'Asian' or 'Asian British' background made up 41.1% of Tower Hamlets' residents – with those of Bangladeshi origin representing nearly a third of the borough's populace (ONS 2011a). Moreover, there are 18 different ethnic groups in the borough, with 33% of households having more than one ethnicity (Jivraj and Simpson 2015). Adding to this ethnic diversity is Tower Hamlets' religious diversity. At the 2011 Census, all major world religions were practised in the borough – with Islam in the plurality, Christianity coming second and Hinduism third (ONS 2011b). This is again represented in the Tower Hamlets' built environment – with the East London Mosque, Christ Church at Spitalfields and the Hindu Pragati Sangha Temple all prominent local landmarks.

Despite such levels of diversity, community relations within Tower Hamlets are generally quite cohesive (Jones 6th May 2014). For example, according to a recent survey, 86% of local residents said that they get on well with their neighbours, while 87% of people said community cohesion was good (Tower Hamlets 1 2015). Moreover, and rather encouragingly, survey measures of cohesion in Tower Hamlets have seen a 'steady improvement' over the course of the EDL's protests (Jones 6th May 2014). Perhaps another contributory factor to this is the conscious effort by the Borough Council to foster cohesion in the borough. For example, Tower Hamlets Council has launched a 'One Tower Hamlets' Fund to help resource local projects that 'bring together residents' (Tower Hamlets Borough Council n.d.). Suggestions on the 'One Tower Hamlets' website, for example, include joint projects to improve quality of life, tackle issues that undermine community cohesion, and build lasting relationships (*ibid.*).

**(b) Far-right mobilisations and counter mobilisations  
in the East End**

In the past, Tower Hamlets' diversity, however, has not been without its difficulties. Strong identification by the borough's white working-class residents with Tower Hamlets' dockers and Cockney past has created significant resistance amongst this sector of the local population towards outsiders (Copsey 2008: 55). Moreover, local political parties have tried to seize upon this prejudice – with some going as far as labelling the local Liberal Democrats as the 'secret racist party' of London (*ibid.*: 56). This also has not been helped by the presence of far-right activists and their testing of (quite effective) localised campaigns in the area. This, plus population churns created by migration within the borough, has meant that Tower Hamlets has become a key target of far-right (and anti-fascist) activity over the past nine years. As Peter Golds (2015), Leader of the Conservative Group at Tower Hamlets Borough Council, comments: 'The history of the East End of London means we've had in the past all sorts of this lot starting [in the Borough] from . . . Oswald Mosley onwards.'

The first wave of far-right activity in Tower Hamlets came in the early twentieth century and was principally directed towards the newly arrived Jewish population. In 1901, for example, one of the UK's first far-right groups, the British Brothers League, was founded in Stepney and came out to oppose the 'Jewish aliens' in the borough (Copsey 2008: 52). Moreover, one of the first and most famous instances of far-right mobilisation was on 4th October 1936, when Sir Oswald Mosley decided to march with 1,900 members of his British Union of Fascists (BUF) from the Royal Mint to Limehouse. On the day of the event itself, however, a large crowd of East End Jews and communists turned out to oppose Mosley's Blackshirts and erected a barricade across the width of Cable Street. After anti-fascists scuffled with police, Sir Phillip Game of the Metropolitan Police ordered officers to disperse the BUF at Embankment (Renton 2001: 141). This skirmish has now forever entered anti-fascist and local popular memory as the 'Battle for Cable Street.'

Moving on forty years, Tower Hamlets' second wave of far-right activity came in the 1970s. This time it had a more openly racial angle and was aimed towards the borough's Bangladeshi residents. In May 1978, for example, three teenage boys murdered a 25-year-old local textile worker, Altab Ali, near Whitechapel road as he walked home from work (London Behind the Scenes n.d.). A combination of local election victories by the National Front and tightening of national legislation on immigration provided the context for mounting tensions in the borough. More locally, the murder also came in the wake of other, non-fatal attacks on the Bangladeshi community with bricks thrown through windows and human excrement smeared on doors. Moreover, the National Front had become ascendant locally – obtaining 23% of the vote in Bethnal Green's St Peter's ward that year (*ibid.*).

Anti-migrant hostility did not end with Altab Ali's death, however. In the 1990s, for example, Tower Hamlets became a key site of far-right electoral ascendance again; this time by the National Front's electoral successor, the neo-fascist British

National Party (BNP). In September 1993, a by-election was held in the borough's Millwall ward after the resignation of the previous Labour incumbent. In the end, the BNP candidate and former heavy goods vehicle driver Derek Beackon became the party's first Councillor – by a margin of just seven votes. This would not last long, however. The local church and other faith organisations were able to outmanoeuvre the BNP's campaigning efforts the following year – unseating Beackon less than a year after he took office through their successful mobilisation of ethnic minority voters. Anti-Fascist Action and the Anti-Nazi League's 'Don't Vote for the Nazis' campaign did not aid this. Poorly timed, it was derided by one local clergyman as 'extremely destructive' to local efforts in countering the BNP (Copsey 2000: 178).

### **(c) Islamist extremism and political corruption in Tower Hamlets**

Not just previously successful far-right campaigns, but the presence of Islamist extremism and political corruption in Tower Hamlets can, however, be posited as reasons for groups like the EDL and Britain First to demonstrate in Tower Hamlets. Taking the former (and despite claims to the contrary), Islamist extremism is a fairly low-level occurrence in Tower Hamlets. For example, in July 2012, two Muslim men from the borough, Mohammed Shabir Ali and Mohammed Shafiq Ali, admitted to fundraising for overseas terrorist organisations (The Evening Standard 31st July 2012). Moreover, in June 2014, the government proscribed a radical Islamist Group, The Sharia Project, after a march against the sale of alcohol in the Brick Lane area of Tower Hamlets (Barnett 27th June 2014). Finally, a shop owned by another radical Islamist, Anjem Choudary, was raided in December 2014 as part of a broader anti-terror offensive by London's Metropolitan Police (Jeory and Perring 25th September 2014). Like in other areas targeted by anti-Islam activists, these show the fairly fringe and peripheral nature of radical Islamism in Tower Hamlets – with no high-profile cases or prominent local links to jihadi terrorism. It therefore seems to be EDL and Britain First folklore (focussed around the Council's former leadership and East London Mosque) which fuels the groups' charge that it is a 'no-go zone' for non-Muslims (for example, see English Defence League Website 3rd September 2011).

Despite extreme Islamism being a misnomer, then, claims of political corruption and electoral fraud are slightly harder to shake off. As early as 2010, for example, allegations of electoral malpractice surfaced when the then Labour Candidate for the newly created mayorship, Lutfur Rahman, was deselected and a police investigation was set up to detect alleged breaches of electoral law (Hill 21st September 2010). This sorry saga was added to in November 2014 when fresh allegations emerged about local grants being given to benefactors close to the Mayor's office. So serious were the allegations that the then Conservative Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, had to appoint commissioners to step in and take over the running of some key functions at Tower Hamlets Borough Council (Radojev 23rd April 2015). The closing chapter of this period came in April 2015, when – in an equally dramatic turn of events – 'Tower Hamlets

First' Mayor Lutfur Rahman was finally removed from office over electoral fraud during his re-election campaign (BBC News 23rd April 2015). The Electoral Commission also struck Rahman's 'Tower Hamlets First' party off the electoral register – noting that the party had consistently underreported its finances since it was set up in September 2013 (Electoral Commission 29th April 2015).

Underlying this perception of political corruption, however, is the role of religious networks in the borough's electoral politics. While not unique to Tower Hamlets (see Peace and Akhtar 2014), it is this form of clan politics that has been an important factor when looking at the drivers and causes of political corruption in the borough. In an interview in 2013, for example, Lutfur Rahman indicated the importance of religious networks within the borough. When describing his own model of mayoral governance, for example, Rahman suggested that religious groups were the 'backbone of Tower Hamlets' and that 'nurturing community' meant 'building up religious outfits and charities,' such as mosques, synagogues and lunch clubs (The Economist 9th November 2013). Moreover, Rahman reportedly used Council funds for political ends in this matter – withdrawing financial support from charities who liaised with opposing political parties (*ibid.*).

As expected, then, these episodes have been used to add grist to the mill for groups like the EDL and Britain First. In a speech at the EDL's September 2011 demonstration in Tower Hamlets, EDL leader Tommy Robinson suggested that 'Rahman was kicked out of the Labour Party for his Islamist extremist ideology' and 'link[s] to Islamist organisations' (Slacker 167 3rd September 2011). Moreover, in a direct reference to allegations of misappropriation of funds, Robinson further stated that Rahman 'has taken a billion pound of tax payers money' to fund 'madrassas, segregation, and apartheid' in the East of End of London (*ibid.*). Moreover, in a website post subsequent to Britain First's May 2014 activities in Brick Lane, the group suggested that there was a 'creeping Islamisation of East London,' and that the group's activism was designed 'to pressure the Muslim community to stamp on the extremists in their midst' (Britain First 30th May 2014). While the veracity of both groups' allegations are dubious, then, their ability to seize on political corruption and then link it to a problematic social interpretation of Islam provided a potent framing device when the groups visited the East London borough, from 2011 to 2016.

## **Part I: EDL demonstrations in Tower Hamlets**

### ***(a) Tower Hamlets' second EDL demonstration (3rd September 2011)***

Arriving within the context of serious disturbances at home and abroad that included the London riots and Anders Breivik's Oslo terror attacks, the EDL mobilised for the first time proper in Tower Hamlets on 3rd September 2011 – after two aborted attempts, in June 2009 and 2010. Reasons for the march vary, but included defending of freedom of speech and depicting Tower Hamlets as a 'no-go' area for non-Muslims (English Defence League Website 3rd September 2011). Unfortunately for the group, the EDL was however forced to hold a

static rally at Aldgate on the day of the demonstration (Townsend 3rd September 2011). Around 1,000 anti-Islam protesters turned out on the day with forty-four EDL protesters arrested for their own safety as one hundred local teenagers launched an attack on one of the group's buses after the demonstration (BBC News 4th September 2011). Also present at the demonstration were 1,500 counter protesters. Based on intelligence that a sizeable number of unaligned counter protesters would turn up, the Metropolitan Police also put on what was described as a 'significant' operation – with around 3,000 police officers either on duty or held in reserve (LBC 2013). In the end, however the protest finished with the group in turmoil as the EDL's leader, Tommy Robinson, was arrested on breach of bail (Sam-Daliri 2nd September 2011). It was, however, a success in terms of publicity for the group. As one senior police officer states: 'because it got a Home Secretary ban and everything else, it became very high profile' (Tower Hamlets 2 2015).

#### *(i) Wider preparations*

The announcement of the EDL's intent to protest in July 2011 came as shock to local elites in Tower Hamlets. As the Leader of the Conservative Group of Councillors, Peter Golds, comments: while far-right protest was not a novel occurrence in the borough, the EDL were still 'relatively new' at the time of the September 2011 protest (Golds 2015). In particular, local politicians were worried about the damage such a group would do to community relations, the potential repercussions it would have for the local Muslim community and the reaction it would provoke – particularly amongst local Asian men trying to defend their families and local community. As one senior Council leader comments: 'it was learning curve for me . . . I think everyone was learning' (Tower Hamlets 1 2015).

Moreover, the first EDL protest came at an awkward time for Londoners and the East End more generally. Only a month earlier, places like Tottenham and Eltham had experienced one of the most disorderly periods in recent memory as looters rampaged through shops and set fire to buildings. Fortunately, no major incidents occurred in Tower Hamlets, but this disorder was particularly weighing on the minds of local policing elites as they prepared for the group's 2011 protest. For example, when commenting on the policing operation, one senior police officer stated that 'in August we had serious disorder in London and also that resulted in increased tension within our communities. What we've had to do is look at all those factors' (LBC 2013). Moreover, the aims and objectives of the 2011 EDL Tower Hamlets operation were firmly tied within the parameters of getting London back to 'business as usual.' As Chief Superintendent at the time, Julia Pendry, noted: 'Following the appalling disorder in London in recent weeks, it's important London, its communities and businesses, can return to normality' (BBC News 2nd September 2011).

Amid fears of a repeat of the riots, one of the first policing responses to the announced EDL demonstration was a ban on the group marching into the borough. For example, in early August 2011, the Tower Hamlets Borough Council passed a resolution calling on both the Metropolitan Police and the Home

Secretary to ban the EDL's demonstration (Tower Hamlets Borough Council 13th July 2011). Moreover, on 25th August 2011, the Metropolitan Police announced that it was applying for a march ban on all demonstrations for thirty days after the 2nd September (Hill 25th August 2011). This was granted a few days later by the Home Secretary, Theresa May, who noted her concern about the need for communities and property to be protected (Walker 26th August 2011). This was again welcomed by the Metropolitan Police's Chief Superintendent, Julia Pendry, who added: 'our message is clear: we do not want people coming into the areas to attend these events' (*ibid.*). Such an intervention was, however, significant – for the first time since the 1981 Brixton riots, the Metropolitan Police had issued a blanket ban on demonstrations in the capital. As Pendry noted at the time: 'we do not take [the EDL's presence] lightly' (BBC News 2nd September 2011).

The blanket ban did not, however, receive a wholly warm reception and was subject to significant criticism. In an op-ed column for *The Guardian*, philosopher Nina Power objected to the measure as 'incredibly foolhardy,' especially as it had the potential to stop an event commemorating the 75th anniversary of the 'Battle of Cable Street' (Power 30th August 2011). In addition, anti-fascist groups, in particular, saw the ban on their demonstration as a 'complete overreaction' that would prove counterproductive (Walker 26th August 2011). Moreover, Unite Against Fascism launched a petition on 26th August 2011 to re-install its right to march – suggesting that it was a 'huge attack' on the human rights and civil liberties of counter demonstrators (Unite Against Fascism 26th August 2011).<sup>1</sup>

While the riots were important context in September 2011, the learning which policing elites used when it came to the EDL's protest originated from previous anti-Islamic mobilisations and a clear shift in Metropolitan Police public-order management after the April 2009 G20 protests. For example, one Chief Superintendent at the time of the 2011 protest recalls the EDL's demonstration against the building of a mosque in Harrow as particularly informative – especially where treatment of EDL counter protest was concerned. The reaction of the community against being penned in with Unite Against Fascism suggested to officers that you couldn't just 'separate the EDL as baddies and everybody else the good guys' (Tower Hamlets 2 2015). Moreover, the EDL was one of the first major protest groups to be subject to recommendations for containment to come out of the G20 protests. One of the strategies on the day of the 2011 protest therefore was a new 'no surprises' approach which dictated that: 'Protesters and the public should be made aware of likely police action in order to make informed decisions' (HMIC July 2009: 10). This was implemented through close liaison with the EDL (as well as local community and faith groups) about the location and organisation of the protest. The rationale behind this being that: 'as police, we can't do it ourselves. We need to the community to support us' (Tower Hamlets 2 2015).

The second set of preparations was the adoption of a broad media campaign to engage with the community and provide information about the forthcoming march. For example, in the week before the demonstration, Lutfur Rahman

urged Tower Hamlets' residents not to 'support any initiatives designed to force confrontation' or defy the ban – suggesting that people should remain peaceful instead (Sam-Daliri 2nd September 2011). Moreover, on the Borough Council website, Rahman, along with the borough's police commander, warned anyone planning to 'come to the borough to protest against the EDL to stay away' (Tower Hamlets Watch 3rd September 2011). This robust media strategy was therefore designed to make sure that there was minimal confrontation on the day of the demonstration.

Added to this more mediatised form of community engagement was direct contact and meeting with Tower Hamlets local stakeholders in the run up to the 2011 demonstration. For example, as one Tower Hamlets Cabinet Member at the time comments (Tower Hamlets 1 2015), they 'listened to all parties' in terms of Council officers, Councillors, community leaders and the organisations within Tower Hamlets and then acted on their 'feeling and concerns.' As this Cabinet Member went on to suggest, the main message was that: 'we had to make sure that they were protected' and that the community rather than political will was being expressed in planning for the day's events (*ibid.*).

Moreover, a youth strategy was drawn up by the Council to make sure that young Asian men did not confront the group. This mainly involved ensuring young people stayed in the borough's youth centres while the demonstration was taking place. Ultimately, however, such activities proved ineffective for a group of one hundred local teenagers who attacked one of the EDL's buses as activists left the demonstration (BBC News 4th September 2011). As one senior police officer on the day commenting on the 2011 incident suggested: '[In the end] I don't think it came with the EDL and the politics. I think it came to: "we are now going to fight for the protection of our Borough"' (Tower Hamlets 2 2015). In some senses, then, police and Council preparations were quickly rendered futile as local youths took it upon themselves to defend their community.

The third set of preparations was for the local authority to encourage a community response to anti-Islamic protest. This came under the banner of 'United East End,' a coalition of trade unions, anti-racists and community groups set up in June 2010 to oppose the EDL's planned demonstration that year (Counterfire 9th June 2010). Supporters included many of the borough's local politicians (Hill 21st June 2010). In the run up to the 2011 demonstration, a large rally of about 700 people was held at the London Muslim Centre on 31st July. This drew together key politicians, such as Lutfur Rahman and former London Mayor Ken Livingstone, and was designed to act as a 'call for unity against the EDL and urge the biggest possible turnout' at the UAF's counter rally (Unite Against Fascism 30th July 2011). On the day of the September demonstration, they organised a counter rally to 'celebrate the East End's diversity and express its opposition to the racist English Defence League' (Unite Against Fascism 22nd July 2011). Even Lutfur Rahman, then newly elected Mayor of Tower Hamlets, encouraged people to turn out at the counter rally – suggesting that: 'If we stay at home we're leaving young people on the streets by themselves' (Ward 23rd August 2011).

### (ii) Political responses

One of the most prolific campaigners in the lead up to the 2011 demonstration was Labour MP for Bethnal Green and Bow, Rushanara Ali. As early as 2010, she had already spoken at the ‘unity rally’ organised in opposition to the aborted EDL demonstration in the borough that year (Hill 21st June 2010). Moreover, in July 2011 when the first *actual* EDL demonstration was announced, she started researching previous policing responses to the EDL – submitting a question in Parliament about Home Office guidance on the matter (HC Debate 12th July 2010). More importantly, Rushanara Ali helped to organise the 25,000-strong petition that called for a ban of the EDL’s 3rd September rally (Lowles 17th August 2011). Finally, on the day of the demonstration itself, Rushanara welcomed the Home Secretary’s decision to ban the EDL – calling for ‘calm in our community’ and stating that the petition had shown the East End ‘to be a powerful force in its opposition to the EDL march’ (Ali 25th August 2011).

In addition to this softer exclusionary stance, Rachel Saunders, Leader of the Labour Group on Tower Hamlets Borough Council, mounted a harder exclusionary response. In the month preceding the demonstration, Saunders had written an in-depth piece on her own personal website about the EDL’s forthcoming demonstration. In a post, dated the 10th August, she urged that the group be banned from Tower Hamlets – suggesting that their presence would create ‘devastation’ on par with the 2011 riots. Drawing on local collective memory, Saunders suggested that it would require a community mobilisation on a similar scale to the ‘Battle for Cable Street’ in order for the EDL to be successfully counteracted. A ban, she believed, would avoid this (Saunders 10th August 2011). In a further post, Saunders also added her support for the ban on the day of the demonstration itself. Writing on the Labour Party activist website, *Labour List*, she again referred to Tower Hamlets’ history of anti-fascism and suggested that banning the group through legal means would have spared the local community from mounting its own response (Saunders 9th September 2011).

One of the most high-profile direct action responses on the day of the 2011 demonstration, however, came from Lutfur Rahman, the borough’s newly elected Mayor. Defying the ban, Rahman marched with fellow Councillors from the East London Mosque to the ‘UAF/ United East End’ protest site and past Whitechapel station (Tower Hamlets Watch 3rd September 2011). He also gave a speech at the rally, thanking those who had turned up and encouraging people to stand in opposition to the EDL (*ibid.*). He was joined on the day by his two Deputy Mayors, Oliur Rahman and Ohid Ahmed, with the latter wishing to send a clear message that the EDL were not welcome in Tower Hamlets (Rahman 2015). This was the continuation of an exclusionary response – started when Oliur had previously signed a petition against the EDL’s aborted demonstration in June 2010 (Unite Against Fascism 7th June 2010). He deemed the ‘United East End’ counter rally in September 2011 important – suggesting it was vital ‘that people come together and express their view in a lawful way, making sure that the community they live and work in is not divided’ (Rahman 2015).

The Labour Group and the mayor's office were not the only political actors present in responding to the EDL in 2011, however. Tower Hamlets' MP, Jim Fitzpatrick, and London Assembly Member, John Biggs, wrote to Prime Minister Theresa May, calling on her to ban the march (Saunders 10th August 2011). Moreover, the leader of the Conservative Group, Peter Golds, was also very active. A month before the demonstration, he also signed a petition calling a ban on the EDL (London Assembly 10th August 2011), wrote to the Home Secretary calling for a ban and threatened to link arms outside the East London Mosque if a march ban wasn't secured (Miah 22nd August 2011). Golds' motivation for lobbying for a ban in 2011 was based on the disruptive and divisive reputation of the EDL, as well as his belief of the group as not merely anti-Islamic but 'racist' (Golds 2015). In the end, however, he decided to stay away from the group's protest – suggesting that a confrontational approach would have been 'counterproductive' and would have led to heightened disorder and tensions in the borough (*ibid.*). Fortunately for Golds, a ban was secured.

### *(iii) Conclusion*

The EDL's first major demonstration in Tower Hamlets was a testing time for police and local elites alike. Here was a group coming into one of London's most ethnically diverse boroughs, just after one of the worst waves of rioting in thirty years, to protest at the presence of extreme Islamism. Fortunately, however, disorder was limited and a ban was secured by authorities that prevented the EDL from rampaging through key Muslim areas of Tower Hamlets. This was mainly as a result of political elites who rallied behind the cause of petitioning for a ban and restricted themselves to passive interventions in order stop the group. In addition, Council Group Leaders, like Rachel Saunders and Peter Golds, were able to evoke the symbolic history of anti-fascism within the borough to rally the community against being provoked by the EDL. Unfortunately, however, the day's events were blighted by one incident in which some of Tower Hamlets' young people decided to confront the EDL at the last minute. The EDL's presence in Tower Hamlets in 2011 did, however, have one positive impact. In the light of the September protest and the sense of 'togetherness' fostered by the event, projects were set up to strengthen relationships between different communities (Jones 6th May 2014).

### ***(b) Tower Hamlets' third EDL demonstration (9th September 2013)***

The EDL's return to Tower Hamlets in the autumn of 2013 came amidst a burst of activity for the protest group. Riding on the wave of the Woolwich terror attacks, the EDL organised over sixty demonstrations, like the one in Leicester, as a memorial to Lee Rigby. According to official EDL sources (English Defence League Website 1st September 2013), however, the Woolwich attacks were not the main motivation for the group's 2013 demonstration in Tower Hamlets. Repeating their initial reason for protesting in 2011, the group still hoped to seize

on scattered reports of ‘Islamism’ within Tower Hamlets to suggest that it had become a non-Muslim ‘no-go’ zone (*ibid.*). Despite heightened anti-Muslim sentiment post-Woolwich (Feldman and Littler July 2014), however, the group was fortunately unable to capitalise on these events; only 500 EDL protesters turned out to demonstrate in Tower Hamlets in 2013.

This did not, however, see a diminution in the scale of disorder on the day. In 2013, fourteen EDL demonstrators (including the group’s leader) and 286 counter protesters were arrested after a group of militant anti-fascists (from the UK’s Anti-Fascist Network) broke away from the UAF protest and towards the EDL’s main protest site in Aldgate (Childs 9th September 2013). While the Metropolitan Police successfully prevented any clashes from happening, the act of counter protesters surging towards the EDL at Aldgate (and trying to blockade the EDL’s march route at Mansell Street) led to one of the worst scenes of disorder at a far-right demonstration in recent times. With the policing operation and policing overtime for the 2013 EDL demonstration costing £1.9 million alone, the borough’s mayor, Lutfur Rahman, commented that it was ‘further evidence’ for a blanket policy of banning anti-Islamic marches in the borough (Bailey 4th November 2013).

#### *(i) Wider preparations*

Unlike in 2011, however, a march ban was not successfully secured in the case of the EDL demonstration. In terms of policing interventions, the borough commander instead decided to use powers under Sections 12 and 13 of the 1986 Public Order Act to alter the course of the group’s march route – stopping it a third of a mile shorter than expected (HC Debate 5th September 2013). This was designed to prevent the protest from passing religious buildings or residential areas – meaning that the group was only allowed to skirt the perimeter of the borough. The reason for this was all too clear; the Chief Superintendent at the time, Jim Read, suggesting that taking the group any closer would have been ‘unnecessarily intimidating and likely to cause disorder and disruption’ (Taylor 6th September 2013). A full ban was, however, considered as going too far. As Read stated at the time: ‘We must also uphold the right to protest, it is a fundamental part of our society’ (BBC News 4th September 2013). In the end, the EDL unsuccessfully challenged these restrictions, taking their plea to the High Court (East London Advertiser 6th September 2013).

Like in 2011, there was a high-profile community response to the announcement that the EDL was coming again in 2013. ‘United East End’ spent the weeks leading up to the demonstration distributing leaflets and organising meetings. Moreover, six days before the protest, the group held a press conference attended by political and religious leaders in the borough – reiterating how they would, like anti-fascists ‘of old,’ block the EDL from entering the borough if needed (Searchlight 3rd September 2013). In the end, not feeling that its calls for a ban were being listened to, ‘United East End’ organised a sizeable counter demonstration on the day of the EDL protest at Altab Ali Park (De Peyer 25th July 2013). All in all, an estimated 5,000 counter protesters descended on Tower Hamlets in

2013 – almost ten times the anti-Islam contingent, and one of the largest counter protests reported in this study.

In addition, lessons were learnt from the outbreaks of violent disorder at the previous demonstration in 2011. Oliur Rahman, then Deputy Mayor, was charged with the local authority response in 2013. In the run up to the demonstration, Rahman made sure that he sent a ‘very clear message’ to the young people of the borough to ‘behave and control themselves’ (Rahman 2015). Moreover, in 2013, a lot of work was done with interfaith and community organisations to make sure that news of the Council’s preparations got out into the community. Finally, Oliur oversaw preparations to avoid the EDL demonstration disrupting the community or damaging ‘any heritage or any buildings in the Borough’ (*ibid.*). This was rooted in the understanding that the group would target ‘Muslim institutions, i.e. mosque and madrassas in some cases’ (*ibid.*). Fortuitously, there was no repeat of intra-communal disorder in 2013.

#### *(ii) Political responses*

Political responses, while not qualitatively different, were on a heightened scale in 2013. For the first time in 2013, MP for Poplar and Limehouse, Jim Fitzpatrick, publicly campaigned against the EDL protest. This was due to a personal objection at the group being able to march near a memorial on Merchant Navy Day – something that particularly struck a chord with Fitzpatrick, who was made a liveryman of the Worshipful Company of Shipwrights in 2011 (Fitzpatrick 2014). Moreover, Fitzpatrick was sensitive to the context in 2013, seeing the group’s decision to demonstrate in London post-Woolwich as ‘clearly provocative’ (*ibid.*). In addition, his actions in 2013 came as part of a ‘joint strategy’ between himself and his Bethnal Green and Bow counterpart, Rushanara Ali MP. It also facilitated part of what he saw as his ‘spokesperson’ role as an MP – voicing discontents amongst the community he represented and ensuring that appropriate action was done to address this (*ibid.*).

In anticipation of the EDL’s march, therefore, Fitzpatrick put considerable effort into campaigning against the group’s presence. For example, when the EDL announced its march, Fitzpatrick vowed to do all he could to stop it – insisting that the EDL and their ‘brand of hate’ had no place in the borough (De Peyer 14th May 2013). Moreover, in a joint letter with Rushanara Ali just a few weeks before the demonstration, he wrote to the Policing Minister, Damian Green, stressing his ‘firm belief’ that the EDL’s demonstration posed a ‘serious threat to both individuals and wider Tower Hamlets community cohesion’ and that the group’s 9th September 2013 demonstration should be banned (Channel 4 News 31st August 2013). Finally, he raised the issue of the EDL march being allowed to go ahead in a House of Commons debate – calling for the EDL to be ‘peaceful’ and the Tower Hill memorial be protected (HC Debate 5th September 2013). In 2013, Fitzpatrick (2014) believed that: the ‘Police clearly felt they were able to keep control of that situation and in the end they probably just about did.’

Rachel Saunders, still Leader of the Labour Group, was also heavily involved in campaigning for a ban, both inside and outside of the Council Chamber. In September 2013, Saunders stated at a press conference hosted by 'United East End' that the EDL would not be allowed to march through Tower Hamlets – promising that the local authority would make sure that 'the police take responsibility to make sure they do not' (Searchlight 3rd September 2013). In the same month, she also supported a motion within Tower Hamlet's Council Chamber that committed Councillors to do all they could in banning the group (Tower Hamlets Borough Council 18th September 2013). Striking a parallel with 2011, Saunders attended the 'United East End' community counter demonstration at Altab Ali Park on the day of the demonstration.

In comparison to 2011, Lutfur Rahman took a more prominent public campaigning role when the EDL returned in September 2013. For example, as early as 23rd August, the Mayor wrote a joint letter with other senior UK politicians to *The Guardian* newspaper calling on the Home Secretary to ban the group's march. This was based on the potential for 'violence against local communities, property and the police' (Lock 21st August 2013). In addition, the Mayor showed particular verve when it was made known that the Metropolitan Police was not banning the EDL from marching – putting together a legal challenge against the Metropolitan Police for not stopping the group (De Peyer 30th August 2013). Finally, before the September 2013 demonstration, Rahman also took particular offence at the EDL using Altab Ali Park – suggesting that it was 'deeply provocative and gratuitous attempt by the EDL' (Unite Against Fascism 4th September 2013). Meanwhile, on the day of the demonstration, he spoke at the UAF counter rally – suggesting that he was 'very fed up' with the EDL's demonstrations and that Tower Hamlets residents 'just want[ed] to get on with [their] normal lives' (Townsend and Jenkins 8th September 2013).

Rahman's Deputy Mayor, Oliur Rahman, also took the similar direct action approach to the EDL's presence in 2013. He spoke at the UAF counter rally on the day of the demonstration – suggesting that the EDL were not 'going to be welcome today, not ever' and reiterating the importance of remaining united (Four-man Films 9th September 2013). When interviewed, Rahman (2015) insisted that a united view between politicians is an essential ingredient for success when the EDL comes to demonstrate – positing that the EDL 'shouldn't be allowed to come to our Borough to divide our communities.' Rahman (2015) also believed that Islamist extremism should be dealt with in the same way as the EDL – suggesting that such criminality and 'evil' needed to be rooted out of all communities and that their 'hated message' was not welcome. He was keen to avoid any 'unnecessary tension' in the borough in 2013 (*ibid.*).

Finally, the Conservative Group Leader on the Council, Peter Golds, was conspicuous by his absence in 2013. In the run up to the demonstration, Golds made sure that his antipathy towards the EDL returning to the borough was known by requesting for his vote on anti-EDL motion be noted in the minutes (Tower Hamlets Borough Council 18th September 2013). Moreover, in a re-run of 2011, Golds heeded police advice on the day of the demonstration and stayed away from

the protest site – deciding to ignore the chaos caused by the EDL and choosing instead to carry on with his normal business of a constituency surgery in the morning and a social event in the evening (Golds 2015). In the interim, when the EDL had planned to demonstrate in nearby Walthamstow, Golds stuck to his previous view that the EDL were an ‘inflammatory group’ and that the Home Secretary was right to ban the group on that occasion (Hirst 25th October 2012). In the end, however, Golds believed that a unified response had been sidelined in 2013. The first factor to contribute to this was divisiveness generated by Lutfur Rahman’s May 2014 mayoral campaign, while the other was the unfortunate incident of the local Labour Party organising a barbecue on the same day as the demonstration (De Peyer 29th August 2013) – the latter incident being used by opponents to question the seriousness of Labour attempts to combat anti-Islamic protest in the borough.

### *(iii) Conclusion*

The EDL’s return to the East End in September 2013 came amidst as equally inauspicious circumstances as did its first appearance. A few months after the Woolwich terror attacks and a subsequent wave of anti-Muslim attacks (Feldman and Littler July 2014), 2013 saw one of the largest arrest counts at an EDL protest. This heightened arrest count was partially to do with the immediate context, but was also due to the sizeable presence of militant anti-fascists on the day of the demonstration desiring to break police lines and confront the group. Like in 2009 and 2011 then, it was the EDL’s ‘avowed opponents’ who complicated policing interventions through provocation by the EDL.

Turning to political responses, these were more sizeable and broader based than in 2011 – with the local Mayor, Lutfur Rahman, and MP for Poplar and Limehouse, Jim Fitzpatrick, joining the ranks in support of banning the group. In the end, however, two important political figures were all but absent in 2013. The first was Rushanara Ali who – though prominent in the case of 2011 – took a lower-level role in that year’s campaigning; instead she relied on a more collaborative approach with her neighbouring Parliamentary counterpart, Jim Fitzpatrick MP. The second was Conservative Group Leader, Peter Golds, who decided not to campaign on the issue in 2013, keeping his line of staying away from the EDL march.

## **Part II: Britain First demonstrations in Tower Hamlets**

### **(a) *Britain First’s ‘Christian Patrols’ in Tower Hamlets*** ***(1st February 2014, 28th May 2014 and 17th January 2015)***

Anti-Islamic protest in the East End of London did, however, not stop with the EDL. Following on for the time period under consideration was an increasing use of direct action tactics by the EDL’s successor, Britain First. For example, in May 2013, and as part of a publicity stunt after the murder of soldier Lee

Rigby, the group's then leader Jim Dowson publically threatened to arrest Anjem Choudary at his East London home (Allen 2014: 356).<sup>2</sup> The first sustained period of activism by Britain First in Tower Hamlets, therefore, came in early 2014. This again was associated with activities of so-called Islamic fundamentalists conducting 'Sharia Patrols' on the streets of the borough in late 2013 and involved members of that patrol (reportedly) harassing couples holding hands, abusing women over their clothing choices and attacking drinkers (Jones 6th December 2013). It was in response to such 'Sharia Patrols' that Britain First started to target the East End of London – using its own self-styled 'Christian Patrols' in response.

*(i) Wider preparations*

The first of these 'Christian Patrols' came on 1st February 2014 when 10–15 Britain First activists marched down Brick Lane – with two Gulf War Land Rovers (Jeory 6th February 2014). Saying that they were in the East End to 'defend British soil against Muslim extremists,' Britain First's activists proceeded to provoke local onlookers – deliberately taunting local people with beer and cigarettes (*ibid.*). The group concluded their 'patrol' at the nearby East London Mosque – unfurling a banner with the epithet 'Resistance' written on it.

While the Metropolitan police did not tend to this first patrol, concern was duly noted by the police force and members of local civil society in the borough. For example, a Metropolitan Police spokesperson suggested that they were aware of the video depicting the incident and said that they would be working with local partners 'to provide a safe environment for those who live, work and visit the borough' (Elgot 5th February 2014). Moreover, Dilowar Khan, then executive director of East London Mosque, stated that: 'We are working with the authorities in response to this incident, which has left many people in fear of intimidation and threats' (*ibid.*).

The second 'Christian Patrol' in the area came quickly after the first. Emboldened by the initial visit, Britain First decided to stage another 'patrol' on 23rd May 2014 with 20–25 activists marching up and down Brick Lane – giving out leaflets and wearing 'activist jackets' (Lo 23rd May 2014). This was proceeded by an attempted 'invasion' of the East London Mosque where Britain First tried to enter – handing out leaflets and arguing with worshippers (Britain First 28th May 2014a).

Compared to the first patrol by Britain First, this second patrol attracted a heightened response by the police and local authorities. In the case of the second 'Christian Patrol,' large numbers of police were mobilised as a large and hostile crowd started to assemble on Brick Lane. Moreover, the group was given a verbal warning when emerging from the East London Mosque by a local Community Police Support Officer (Britain First 28th May 2014b). Video emerged shortly after on the East London Mosque website – demonstrating how quickly the group entered and exited the mosque (East London Mosque 19th May 2014).<sup>3</sup>

The third and final set of 'patrols' happened in January 2015 in the wake of a radical Islamist terror attack on the offices of the French satirical weekly

newspaper, Charlie Hebdo. This saw a number of Britain First activists approaching people on the street in Brick Lane and Whitechapel with leaflets calling for the banning of mosques and niqabs (Withnall 19th January 2015). Matthew Collins, an expert from the anti-fascist campaign group Hope not Hate, suggested that this last patrol was related to Britain First's struggles for funding in the lead up to the 2015 General Election (*ibid.*). Again, compared to Britain First's first 'patrol' in Tower Hamlets, police were very quick to mobilise at the group's presence in the borough. Footage taken by Britain First suggests that about ten police officers came to the scene in order to quell any disorder that might have resulted from the group's provocative actions (Birmingham Infidels UK 18th January 2015). In terms of the Council response, its main objective was to work with the police and third sector partners in order to ensure the community felt safe and that to signal that 'people such as Britain First are not welcome in Tower Hamlets' (Rahman 19th May 2017). Moreover, and building upon experiences of 2011, there was also a lot of 'work in partnership with the local authorities to make sure that young people doesn't react to it' (*ibid.*).

### *(ii) Political responses*

Political responses to Britain First's 'Christian Patrols' were initially muted. Due to the low-level visibility of the demonstrations, it wasn't until the second set of activities that local politicians really responded to the group. In relation to the May 2014 East London Mosque 'invasion,' Tower Hamlet's two MPs, Rushanara Ali and Jim Fitzpatrick, both stepped in to condemn Britain First's activities – suggesting that: 'Tower Hamlets has a proud history of rejecting those who try to divide us. . . . These Britain First trouble makers should take heed and recognise their rhetoric is not welcome in Tower Hamlets' (Lo 23rd May 2014). Moreover, when the group came again in early 2015, Britain First was issued a similarly exclusionary response – with Rushanara Ali stating that: 'Time and again, people in the East End have come together to reject hatred and intolerance. The divisive rhetoric of fringe groups such as "Britain First" has no place in our East End' (Withnall 19th January 2015). Finally, responses by community actors were important over the course of all the 'Christian Patrols' – with the chair of the local interfaith forum, Reverend Alan Green, stating that Britain First did not 'represent' the local community and weren't 'welcome here' (RT 12th February 2014).

### *(iii) Conclusion*

Britain First's initial wave of so-called Christian Patrols in Tower Hamlets withered in comparison to the EDL. This is not to say, however, that they were any less provocative – using more direct action tactics to directly challenge local residents. In response, the Metropolitan Police stepped up its responses to quell these incidents – with local senior politicians expressing their condemnation of these actions. This was not, however, enough to prevent the group from continuing its activism in the borough going forward.

**(b) Britain First's 'flash demonstrations' in Tower Hamlets  
(1st and 12th March 2016, 9th April 2016)**

More recently, Britain First has moved away from its patrols towards a second wave of 'flash demonstrations' as a means of targeting Tower Hamlets. Initially, and over the course of two weekends in March 2016, Britain First activists held two 'flash demos' outside of the East London Mosque (ELM). In the first instance on 2nd March, Britain First's deputy leader, Jayda Fransen, posed outside the ELM with a banner and two other Britain First activists – stating 'Britain First: Taking Our Country Back' (York 2nd March 2016).<sup>4</sup>

In the second instance, fifteen Britain First activists mobilised outside the ELM – chanting 'We Want Our Country Back' (Collier 12th March 2016). Carrying a banner stating 'Britain First: No More Mosques,' the group was issued with a Section 12 order by police and a local vicar intervened – standing between the group and the gathering crowd of young Muslim men. Elders at the mosque urged the authorities to look into banning the group from Tower Hamlets, due to the sustained targeting given to the ELM (Wright 14th March 2016). In the end, Britain First was escorted out of the area in their vehicles after being corralled in the nearby Altab Ali Park.

The second set of 'flash' mobilisations by Britain First came on 9th April 2016. Arriving again outside the ELM, fifteen Britain First activists were met with a hostile crowd as they blocked the entrance to the mosque (Wright 12th April 2016). Again unfurling a 'No More Mosques' banner, two Britain First activists were arrested and bail conditions set – temporarily restricting them from associating with Britain First and EDL members as well as going within 250 metres of any UK mosque (*ibid.*). Scenes turned ugly as a fight broke out between Britain First activists and local youths – with one flying kick delivered to a Britain First supporter making the national newspapers (Flynn 12th April 2016).<sup>5</sup> As one interviewee observed, it was reminiscent of the 'mini-riot' (Tower Hamlets 3 2017).

*(i) Wider preparations*

Like with the previous 'Christian Patrols,' Britain First's final wave of 'flash demonstrations' in Tower Hamlets were also unannounced. This has meant that local police, politicians and community actors were largely reactive to the group's protests. In each instance, Britain First has attracted attention by the local police and community leaders keen to stop any altercations or violence from breaking out. With the exception of the April 2016 mobilisation, these demonstrations have been kept largely peaceful, with little in the way of arrests and public disorder.

Having said this, there appears to be an increasing trend over this period towards more robust forms of policing as the East London Mosque has come under sustained targeting by the group. Police were criticised for being too slow to respond in the second March 2016 'flash demo' and stepped up their interventions accordingly (Rahman 19th May 2017). Similarly, there has been increasing disquiet amongst the local community on the subject of banning the group from

demonstrating in the East End. This has led to an increasingly exclusionary tenor to interventions by the authorities, as well as the setting up of a telephone tree in order to alert local faith leaders about the group's presence and the hiring of an around-the-clock security guard at the East London Mosque.

### *(ii) Political responses*

In terms of political responses, then, a key focus by local political elites has been attempts to be seen to be taking into account such disquiet when organising interventions. For example, after the second March 2016 'flash demo,' a number of local politicians who were key in campaigning against the EDL (Peter Golds and Oliur Rahman) supported a motion by the Council that advocated '[a] ban [on] Britain First from demonstrating in any part of our Borough' (Tower Hamlets Borough Council 23rd March 2016). Moreover, and in the wake of the 9th April visit by the group, the Council and Metropolitan Police investigated whether Community Protection Notices could be used to block further activities by the group (Brooke 13th April 2016). Finally, Rushanara Ali MP raised the issue of the Britain First 'flash demos' in the House of Commons – relatedly suggesting that there is 'a lack of resources for policing, and inept legal provision in tackling, the hateful groups that are trying to stir up intolerance and violence in our communities' (HC Debate 29th June 2016).

One of the key local elites to spearhead interventions around such demonstrations in 2016 was John Biggs, then newly elected Mayor of Tower Hamlets. In immediate response to the 9th April 2016 flash demo, he condemned Britain First for hosting 'racist' and 'provocative' protests in Tower Hamlets – stating that the 'hatred and division' of Britain First had 'no place' in the borough (Wright 12th April 2016). Moreover, and in relation to the earlier March demonstrations, he urged residents to 'be vigilant' and 'maintain the higher ground, away from the gutter of provocation where these groups belong' (Proto 15th March 2016).

In the weeks after both the March and April 2016 incidents, Biggs therefore worked with the local police to see whether there would be a way of banning the group. On 15th March, he met senior Metropolitan Police commanders to see how future provocations could be dealt with and the possibility of using legal powers to block further appearances outside the ELM (*ibid.*). Moreover, on 12th April, Biggs held a meeting with representatives of the East London Mosque, the Metropolitan Police and Chief Executive of Tower Hamlets to discuss the legal options available to confront and block Britain First protest (Weavers 12th April 2016). Unfortunately for Biggs, however, the Metropolitan Police were unable to ban the group from demonstrating – citing that the police 'do not have the legal power to ban a static protest' (Kraemer 18th March 2016).

Despite this, the March 2016 'flash demos' sparked a round of community engagement and preparations that placed local policymakers in better stead for Britain First's April visit. According to John Biggs (2017), protocols were developed in conjunction with the Metropolitan Police 'whereby we would try to make sure that there were local deployments where necessary.' Moreover, the Borough Council also developed 'calming messages through the Mosques and through

faith networks' in order to de-escalate the threat of young Muslim men reacting negatively to Britain First (*ibid.*).

Another key local political elite to campaign against Britain First's 'flash' demos in 2016 was Councillor Oliur Rahman. Issuing a tweet after the first demonstration to see what the Mayor was doing in response to the group (East London News 13th March 2016), Rahman called for a ban on Britain First assembling outside mosques as well as inviting the leaders of Britain First to a 'civic, political or theological debate,' offering them the opportunity to make their point of view known in a 'civilised manner' (Kraemer 17th March 2016). This rather contradictory approach had two clear rationales. The first exclusionary response was based on a belief that Britain First's sustained targeting of the ELM had overstepped a line in terms of freedom to worship – stating that 'when you come to a place of worship you prevent people from entering, you prevent young people from leaving the mosque who are having classes there – that is outrageous and I condemn that in the strongest terms possible' (*ibid.*: 2017). Meanwhile, the second, more inclusionary approach had a more educative function – stressing that: 'They need to be taught and told about what is Islam all about because there are large misconceptions about Islam' (Rahman 2017).

Finally, and in terms of community response, local priest Reverend Alan Green was key in April 2016. On his way to shops during the 12th March 'flash demo' and wearing his clerical collar, Green tried to mediate between Britain First and an angry crowd assembling in opposition to the group – also demanding that they should 'stop waving crosses around and making them a symbol of hate' (Allegretti 12th March 2016). According to Green, this caused him 'a lot of grief' with Britain First, which did a lot to defame him on the internet and social media (Green 2017). Not perturbed, he publically condemned the group's final demonstration outside the ELM – stating that: 'They seek to incite a violent reaction to justify their Islamophobia. Until this incitement is prevented by legal means it is vital that the whole community stands together peacefully' (Enfield 20th April 2016).

### *(iii) Conclusion*

Britain First's final wave of activism within Tower Hamlets was as equally inauspicious as the first. Repeatedly arriving unannounced in front of a major local landmark with provocative banners, it took several visits by the group before local officials were able to develop a response. This became more exclusionary over time and looked at innovative ways to: a) reassure the local community of their safety to worship without due hindrance, and b) restrict Britain First's movements in front of and around the mosque premises. Unfortunately, attempts to impose bans against the group were either unsuccessful or temporary.

## **Conclusion**

Tower Hamlets holds an iconic status within UK-based anti-Islamic activism. With a high percentage of Muslim residents and one of London's largest mosques, the East London borough has emerged in EDL and Britain First 'folklore' as geographic spectre of (what the protest movement deems to be) the 'problematic face

of Islam in UK society today.' As pointed out earlier in this chapter, however, the extent to which such caricature exists in reality is highly debatable. For instance, there have been no high-profile cases of Islamist extremism or 'no-go' areas in the borough. Moreover, there have only been largely spurious and unfounded accusations about the influence of 'Islamism' at the party-political level – with electoral and financial malpractice being the only major instance of political corruption in the borough.

This aside, however, such a potent frame has meant that the presence of anti-Islamic protest in Tower Hamlets has presented quite a test for local elites and the police. Not since Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts has there quite been such a period of high-scale visitation by the far right (and far left) to the borough. For example, in the case of Tower Hamlets in 2011 and 2013, rising public disorder and arrest figures continued to be a persistent feature of EDL protest. Moreover, Britain First's repeated targeting of Brick Lane and the East London Mosque have led to small pockets of disorder breaking out. Surprisingly, this disorder has not always come from the far right, but rather from the group's 'avowed opponents' – both from within and outside the borough. In turn, this has forced the Metropolitan Police to employ more and more robust policing tactics and aggressive arrest strategies – shipping EDL protesters out of the borough in September 2011, using containment techniques to hem in anti-fascists two years later and, finally, exploring the use of bans in the case of Britain First.

In sum then, anti-Islamic protest in Tower Hamlets forms the final case study of this book – and is an apt one to end on. It has been an inauspicious period for the borough over the past several years. Faced with repeated waves of far-right activism, both the Metropolitan Police and local political elites have thrown considerable time and resources into managing both the public-order and community cohesion effects of the EDL, Britain First and its opponents. Policing tactics have, however, had dubiously little effect on quelling disorder and, in some cases, dealing with the counter protesters. The Tower Hamlets case will therefore go down as another paradoxical period for responses to anti-Islamic protest – being able to successfully mobilise a political but not a similarly effective policing response in one of London's most diverse boroughs.

## Notes

- 1 The irony of the UAF's previous calls for an EDL march ban were not, however, wasted on one *Daily Telegraph* columnist, who stated that: 'In finding itself banned, Unite Against Fascism has fallen victim to its own brand of boneheaded illiberalism' (O'Neill 29th August 2011).
- 2 In an instance of 'tit-for-tat' radicalisation, this related to allegations that one of Rigby's executioners, Michael Adebolajo, had been radicalised by Choudary's radical Islamist group, Al-Muhajiroun (Lowles 19th December 2013).
- 3 In a brilliant piece of counter-messaging, the mosque described the 'invasion' as a 'fail' (East London Mosque 19th May 2014).
- 4 Even more provocatively, she urged onlookers to 'turn away from the false prophet [i.e. Mohammed] and embrace the saviour Jesus Christ' (York 2nd March 2016).
- 5 Symptomatic of Britain First's social media reach, the video of this attack has been viewed over 900,000 times (Tower Hamlets 3 2017).

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# Conclusion

## Key findings, recommendations and future responses

Over the past nine years, anti-Islamic groups have visited a number of towns and cities up and down the UK protesting at their concerns about the ‘creeping Islamisation’ within UK politics and society. This has placed an unprecedented test on the time, expertise and resources of local political elites, the police and civil society. While a small and fragmented literature has charted the governmental, policing and civil society responses to this form of anti-Islamic protest (Allen 2014; Copsey 2010; Goodwin 2013; Renton 2014; Treadwell 2014), little is known about how UK politicians have responded to anti-Islamic protest where groups like the EDL and Britain First have manifested the most: at the local level. This study addresses this lacuna. Using five structured and focussed case studies (George and Bennett 2005),<sup>1</sup> this research book is the first to systematically map interventions by UK policy practitioners towards these two new protest movements – delving into the thinking and rationales that came with it and the successes and failures that have been experienced in their dealing with anti-Islamic protest.

Whether these external responses have factored in the demise of the EDL and Britain First are something to be explored elsewhere (Allchorn Forthcoming), the principal finding of this study has however been that, while the majority of local politicians interviewed have taken a largely restrictive and exclusionary approach to the presence of anti-Islamic activism, there have been a vibrant array of rationales and other (more inclusionary) strategies used in the process. Taken together, these may have had some sizeable (albeit indirect) effect on the fortunes of the groups – limiting the rhetorical (and, in some cases, the physical protest) space of anti-Islamic activism and therefore wearing down these fledgling movements.<sup>2</sup>

As alluded to throughout this study, however, it could also be down to intra-group dynamics. For the EDL, for example, Busher (2015: 131) has argued that could be said that the initial ‘buzz’ of a new, chaotic movement quickly gave way to a ‘scarcity mentality’ in late 2011 after a series of schisms and splits. Moreover, for Britain First, it could be the largely elitist, top-down style of the organisation that has stymied its offline growth. In any case, and as noted in the book’s introduction, the organised UK far right is in a current state of flux. ‘[P]olitically marginalised, fractured, leaderless and increasingly violent’ (Hopkins 8th February 2016), now is good a time as any to learn lessons about responses towards the EDL, Britain First and other (similar) forms of anti-Islamic extremism in the UK.

## **Key findings: from causes to consequences**

One of the primary aims of this book has been to move the emphasis of research on the UK far right away from examining the causes and characteristics of groups, like the EDL and Britain First, and towards the impacts and policy consequences of this new and largely disruptive form of political protest.

In Chapter 1, we started by reviewing the rise of anti-Islamic protest in Europe and the evolution of the UK far right. The purpose of this chapter was to examine how the current epoch fits within the history of the UK far right, as well as the broader role of anti-Islamic activism within far-right campaigns over the last twenty years. More specifically, this chapter looked primarily at how the UK far right has changed and evolved over the past decade from electoral politics (back) to repertoires of action more historically associated with the traditional far right. Here, discontinuities were also stressed – arguing that a new anti-Islamic epoch has arrived that has seen the UK far right enter a more criminal space of anti-Muslim protests and attacks, both online and offline. This has seen new policy instruments come to the fore in relation to public-order management, community cohesion, counter-extremism and hate crime in order to interdict this new form of extremism at the national level.

Chapter 2 then moved on to detail the book's typology and what specific policy countermeasures can be brought against anti-Islamic groups. The main purpose of this chapter was to familiarise the reader with the burgeoning literature on responses to the far right in Europe more generally, as well as the responses to the EDL and Britain First more specifically. Using this, it also generated the first specific typology of countermeasures which politicians can draw upon when responding to anti-Islamic protest. This distinguished between short-, medium-, and long-term inclusionary responses, as well as approaches that provide 'hard' and 'soft' exclusion in relation to the far right. More pertinently, it set out an analytical and evaluative framework for the following case study chapters – with the aim of tying responses together. One of the key arguments of this book is that inclusionary rather than exclusionary responses that use interaction and engagement will prove the most sustainable over time. This will involve 'winning over' those attracted to join such extremist groups and should also be matched by longer-term 'immunisation' strategies that enhance educational initiatives around reducing prejudice as well as civil society responses that continue to render the ideologies and actions of these groups as 'beyond the pale.'

Chapter 3 revealed our first key findings about localised responses to anti-Islamic protest. The first case of policy responses studied was the South Bedfordshire town of Luton. Still in recovery from being the site of EDL emergence, both the EDL and Britain First further tested elites in Luton by organising three subsequent demonstrations in February 2011, May 2012, November 2014 and June 2015. Unsurprisingly, what this chapter found was that the key motivation behind the responses to anti-Islamic protest was to restore Luton's reputation from being the place 'where it all began.' One interesting outcome of this process was the creation of a town centre policy and civil injunction by the Council and

Bedfordshire Police that effectively ruled out far-right marches from the town's central St. George's Square, and achieved what other Council leaders had only dreamt of – placing the rights of the community over the rights of protesters. It therefore stands as a key watershed in responses to anti-Islamic activism, and speaks of wider innovation by the Lutonian political elite within this period – co-convening a nationwide Specialist Interest Group on Far-Right Extremism to share best practice and capacity building nationally, also. This is not to say, however, that the Council's town centre policy and Bedfordshire Police's civil injunction were an untarnished success. Key questions can – and should – be raised about the democratic and legal effect of selectively excluding protest from the town centre. Luton, therefore, also highlights the possible democratic consequences of harder exclusionary responses and revisits the classic liberal dilemma of where to draw the line when restricting 'intolerant' groups.

Following on from the first case study in Chapter 3, Chapter 4 helped sketch out responses to anti-Islamic protest in Birmingham, which has hosted seven major pockets of protest by the EDL and Britain First that occurred in 2009, 2011, 2013, 2014 and 2017. Over the course of these demonstrations in Birmingham, it was found that as political responses became more exclusionary, police responses tracked the opposite arc: becoming softer, less confrontational and more consultative over time. These twin arcs, while running in parallel, contributed to the neutralisation of anti-Islamic protest as a public-order threat.

The third case study in Chapter 5 revolved around anti-Islamic demonstrations in Bradford, another area that has experienced several, sizeable anti-Islam protests. In August 2010, October 2013, May 2014, November 2015 and February 2016, the EDL and Britain First embarked on a sustained campaign to 'hit' the former mill town; this implicitly picked up upon the fractious nature of community relations within Bradford 'post-riots.' What was found in the Bradford case was that rioting in the mid-1990s and early 2000s perversely helped local policymakers in their public-order preparations for the EDL and Britain First's presence during the second decade of the new millennium. The frame, focus and resolve bred from an earlier period of significant disorder helped facilitate a vigilant attitude when the anti-Islam groups came to demonstrate, and this – combined with an occasionally large police presence – prevented a re-occurrence of disturbances seen nine years prior to the EDL first demonstration. Moreover, lessons learnt at initial mobilisations were then also transferred across when subsequent activities by the EDL and Britain First occurred in the West Yorkshire city, as both the EDL and Britain First returned in every consecutive year from 2013 onwards.

Chapter 6, the fourth case study chapter, moved the book on to consider the (somewhat curious) case of anti-Islamic protest in Leicester – a city that has popularly been vaunted for the harmonious nature of community relations (BBC News 29th May 2001). In studying the anti-Islamic protests of 2010, 2012, 2013 and 2016 in the East Midlands city, we found that the EDL and Britain First's presence had spelt one of the most acrimonious periods in Leicester politics. This shows potentially deleterious and politically divisive effects of the group's mobilisations

and responses to it. Despite this, however, Leicester has been a considerable success story in policing anti-Islamic protest – with Leicestershire police able to learn the requisite public-order management lessons from 2010 in order make sure that mass disorder didn't arise again in 2012, 2013 and 2016.

Chapter 7, our fifth and final case study chapter, told the story of Tower Hamlets – a place not unfamiliar with historic far-right and anti-fascist mobilisations. Surprisingly, however, it was the ‘avowed opponents’ of anti-Islamic campaigners who became a chief source of disorder when the EDL decided to protest in the East London borough as early as the summer of 2009. In September 2011, for example, a group of local teenagers took the decision to confront the EDL, vandalising a bus exiting the borough after the protest. Moreover, when anti-Islamic protest returned for a second time two years later, it was the turn of militant anti-fascists from the UK’s Anti-Fascist Network to cause mayhem – this time making a break from the main UAF counter rally to blockade the EDL’s march route. Finally, in April 2016, it was local teenagers who again were provoked into violent confrontation with anti-Islamic protestors – almost causing a ‘mini-riot’ outside the East London Mosque when confronting Britain First in the process. In the case of Tower Hamlets, therefore, one of the issues highlighted about anti-Islamic protest has been the sometimes troubling nature of counter protest groups and their involvement in ramping up public disorder. Tower Hamlets was, therefore, a poignant case to end on – showing how those wishing to ‘do good’ by opposing anti-Islamic activism can all too easily end up perpetuating the public-order problems posed by this particular form of protest.

In conclusion, the current study has made a significant impact on the body of knowledge about anti-Islamic protest in three ways. First, it has helped to further realise Busher’s (2014) ideal of shifting the scholarly focus away from looking simply at the causes and characteristics of the anti-Islamic protest towards looking at the policy consequences of the groups’ main repertoire of action: localised protest. Second, it is the first detailed examination of EDL and Britain First demonstrations across the UK – picking out what drives anti-Islamic protest and responses to it over time in specific local contexts. This is also the first cross-case analysis of multiple related case studies of its kind. Third, it is a rare study of a far-right social movements (Caini et al. 2012: 4; Caini 2017: 1) and, even rarer, a study of responses to such social movements. As Pilkington (2016: 8) notes, the far right tends to get overlooked by political scientists and sociologists in favour of more progressive forms of protest. This will be picked up upon in the penultimate section. Now we will turn to some of the lessons and policy recommendations that can be drawn from the current study.

## **Lessons and policy recommendations**

Broadening out, what lessons can be drawn from these case studies? In particular, what we can recommend in terms of ‘best practice’ when dealing with the EDL, Britain First and other forms of anti-Islamic activism over the time period? In terms of political responses, a ‘paradigm shift’ from exclusion towards inclusion

can be thoroughly recommended. While a relatively benign ‘soft’ exclusivist track has been trodden by most elites in this study, it would be beneficial to see more elites engaged in locally ran projects, such as ‘Be Birmingham,’ ‘Luton in Harmony’ and ‘One Tower Hamlets.’ This actively promoted interaction between diverse parts of different communities within a particular locale. It could also help rob the EDL and Britain First of its prejudicial barbs – helping to ‘immunise’ communities against anti-Islamic politics and racist politics more generally (Pedahzur 2004). This is especially instructive given the recent rise in reports of racist and anti-Muslim attacks, post-Brexit (Sommers 11th July 2016) and in the wake of a wave of terror attacks at the start of 2017 (Dodd and Marsh 7th June 2017).

A key policy recommendation based on this, therefore, would be more sustained interest and investment in such initiatives by local and national politicians. As highlighted earlier, this resonates with the Department of Communities and Local Government approach to tackling extremism as part of its broader, more localised strategy that promoted community integration during this period. On a similar note, we can recommend that more engagement by the government and politicians with the concerns of communities who have a weak sense of belonging or feel ‘left behind’ (Ford and Goodwin 2014) is needed in order to better tackle extremist politics in the future. This was successfully attempted by Bradfordian politician, Councillor David Green, locally, and former Communities Secretary, John Denham, nationally, and could be a route to robbing more populist elements of anti-Islamic groups and their respective agendas.

In terms of policing responses, this study also has important recommendations when it comes to managing anti-Islamic protest. In places like Birmingham and Leicester, it is clear that large, confrontational public-order policing strategies have been mostly ineffective in quelling disorder. Drawing on insights from crowd psychology (Waddington and King 2005) and the work of James Treadwell (2014), this book suggests that forceful containment tactics used within these strategies end up unifying large crowds against the police and therefore lead to mass disorder. On the other hand, more consensual, low-key approaches which engage in negotiations with protesters and communities both on the day and in the lead up to anti-Islamic demonstrations have seen disorder drop dramatically (Van Der Wal 2011: 147). This is not a plea for the adoption of the latter, irrespective of the challenge posed by protesters on the day of a demonstration. It might, however, be sensible to suggest that – after an initial high-scale response, either on the day or over a course of demonstrations – these softer, lower-scale approaches should become the norm in policing EDL and Britain First protests (*ibid.*). As noted in Chapter 7, this broadly follows key reforms in the field of public-order protest by the UK police nationally after the April 2009 London G20 protests that lead to a wider adoption of ‘no surprise’ tactics in public-order management (See HMIC July 2009). It would see a return to the ‘low-key minimal force image’ of UK policing more historically, also (Reiner 1998: 41).

In terms of anti-fascist responses, though not the main focus of the study, we can also posit some recommendations along the lines of arguments already made by Nigel Copsey (2010; 2016). While anti-fascist groups (such as Unite Against

Fascism) have been persistent in their confrontation of groups like the EDL and Britain First on the streets, this study has found such tactics to be counterproductive in two ways. First, the physicality of such opposition actually adds ‘grist to the mill’ of these groups by responding to the dynamic of provocation that they feed off. While the acts and principles of the EDL and Britain First should not be condoned, confrontation can sometimes be counterproductive. In fact, and on a large number of occasions found in this book, physical confrontation draws more attention to anti-Islamic protest and can result in mass disorder. The second is that by shouting ‘Nazi,’ ‘Fascist’ or ‘Islamophobe’ at EDL and Britain First supporters, you actually risk hardening their resolve by strengthening their beliefs that they are an embattled and victimised minority (Oaten 2014). Instead, non-confrontational techniques such as gathering petitions for march bans and being engaged in grassroots anti-racism projects, would better counteract the impacts and trajectory of such far-right groups. As Copsey (2010: 33) wrote in relation to the EDL, ‘when EDL events go unopposed, they are more likely to pass off without major incident.’ Such learnings could also be transferred across to Britain First, as well. A key recommendation of this book, therefore, is to implore anti-fascist activists to reflect on their tactics and explore more preventative means of dealing with the far right in the UK. Based on the evidence presented in this book, one can argue that it is not just simply a case of outnumbering the far right, but actually tailoring responses to target the drivers of anti-Islamic populism and prejudice that is appropriate for a particular local context. This, again, is highlighted and demonstrated in the work of Hope not Hate, who ‘engage with communities and listen to what they say rather than simply “imposing strategy from outside”’ (*ibid.*).

### **Concluding remarks: towards an ‘inclusivist turn’?**

To conclude, then, the scale of anti-Islamic activism from June 2009 to present has tested policing elites, political elites and communities from across the UK. In response to the main research question, ‘how have UK policy practitioners responded to the EDL and Britain First over the past nine years?’ three principal conclusions can be drawn:

The first is that political responses have been both varied and diverse. While the effect of the interventions, campaigns and rhetoric constructed by elites have been – on the whole – exclusionary, this book has found that there are some signs of inclusion. For example, David Green in Bradford saw attempts to engage with white working-class communities as part of their attempts to deal with anti-Islamic protest, while many have also engaged with Muslim communities in the lead up to the group’s disruptive and sometimes violent demonstrations. Moreover, it is noteworthy to stipulate here that exclusion – the most popular tactic found in this study – doesn’t simply come in one, but rather in many, forms. For example, attempts by local politicians to exclude the groups have not simply involved calls for proscribing the EDL and Britain First – banning or restricting its demonstrations. It has also involved more indirect acts of exclusion. These involve lodging Parliamentary motions against these groups, signing petitions and mobilising

pressure for march bans – attempting to reduce the rhetorical and physical space of the EDL and Britain First through existing legal methods.

The second is that, when drilling down beyond *prima facie* responses, this book has found a welter of ‘behind-the-scenes’ reasons, role perceptions and understandings of anti-Islamic protest. A key addition to the literature on far-right responses, these have helped inform such responses – and vary even if they have the same exclusionary or inclusionary effect. For example, there are clearly practical, symbolic and contextual motives that help define both exclusionary and inclusionary responses. Moreover, the perceived role of a representative when the EDL or Britain First comes to town also takes many forms and has an (albeit partial) bearing on how local political elites have constructed their responses to this new form of political protest over the past nine years.

The third major conclusion of this book is a commitment to seeing more long-term preventative strategies being exercised by elites when the EDL, Britain First and other far-right groups come to town. The frequent use of exclusionary strategies by elites is not unexpected, due to the popularity and short-term effectiveness of such techniques, but initiatives that are based around social interaction or elite engagement with community concerns are arguably the most effective when dealing with the drivers of political extremism in the long-term. This is not new. Efforts to foster social interaction have already been tried in Birmingham, Luton and Tower Hamlets, but they could also be rolled out in the equally diverse areas of Leicester and Bradford. Such initiatives still, however, need to be sensitively structured and broached in a genuine way to work. As one set of scholars has rightly pointed out (see Burja and Pearce 2011), they also need to be initiated and wanted ‘from below’ rather than something that is seen to be implemented ‘from above.’ Therefore, a more system-wide look at what other educational and civil society responses are required will also need to be factored into preventative work (Markopoulou and Norman 2018; Pedahzur 2004). Only then will the drivers of anti-Islamic protest be more comprehensively addressed. Only then will we have adequately responded to the EDL and Britain First in the all-important context of post-Brexit Britain.

## Notes

- 1 Structured in the sense that you approach your case studies with a general set of questions that reflect your research objectives (George and Bennett 2005: 69), and focussed in the sense that you look upon certain aspects of historical cases (*ibid.*).
- 2 This has also been seen more internationally with the demise of PEGIDA chapters in the UK (Allchorn 2016), Switzerland and Austria being the result of bans and restrictive policing practices (Berntzen and Weisskircher 2016).

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