

A PHOTO ESSAY BY **JACK LAURENSEN**

Armies of the Right

The English Defence League is on the march parading its message of hate and intolerance across the nation

An injured officer is assisted by colleagues as anti-fascist protesters clash with police in central London where the leader of the far-right British National Party, Nick Griffin, was invited to appear on BBC Question Time in October 2009.

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One of the disturbing features of the rise of right wing politics in Europe is the emergence of fanatical groups such as the English Defence League, whose targets are immigrants and asylum-seekers. Jack Launson followed the group as it swaggered around the country, parading its message of hate

A smoke grenade lands by my feet, a pound coin hits me on the right shoulder, and the entire street is showered with stones and half-full beer cans. Another smoke grenade – this one purple – ignites with a hiss beneath the hooves of nearby police horses. The formation panics briefly until the officers bring their steeds back into line.

The police, which have until now been maintaining an uneasy peace, leap into action. Hundreds of riot officers draw batons and force the rowdy horde back into their designated pen. Other officers roughly remove locals and journalists from the high street yelling “get back, get back, get BACK!”

Aware of the fact that I’m one of the few photojournalists not wearing a helmet, I sneakily pick up the pound coin and duck into a nearby alleyway as a various assortment of missiles continue to fall on the streets of the northern English city of Bradford.

Despite the apparent generosity of this group in Bradford, who decided to throw coins and booze at reporters and local Asians, the somewhat infamous English Defence League are rarely discussed in the context of their charity and philanthropy. Founded under the ideology of “peacefully opposing” what they regard as the “spread of Islamic extremism throughout British society” the EDL have left a wake of blood and destruction across England and they’ve so far clashed with riot police and anti-fascists in London, Bolton, Luton, Ayelsbury, Bradford, Newcastle, Birmingham and dozens



Far-right English Defence League supporters square off with riot police at an anti-Islam demonstration in Bradford



In Summer 2010, English Defence League supporters rallied in various towns across the country



EDL supporters are searched for knives by police before being allowed to attend a rally in Bradford

of other cities and towns. For an organisation that preaches peaceful resistance to the “evil” of Islam violence and public disorder has followed them everywhere they travel. The hypocrisy of the EDL and their supposed anti-evil crusade is unrivaled and they would be a laughable cliché unworthy of attention if their “demonstrations” didn’t attract thousands of racist, violent hooligans.

Usually peaceful and quite picturesque, Ayelsbury, in Buckinghamshire, north of London, is a ghost-town today. The streets are empty, many shops and restaurants are closed and boarded up. A reflection of what the local people expect when the EDL come to town. Understandable as they undoubtedly saw what happened in earlier gather-



EDL supporters arrive on a chartered coach in Bradford. Towns with high-concentrations of Asians and Muslims are targeted by EDL mobs and their demonstrations almost always descend into violence



Police and reporters are targeted with stones, coins, beer cans and smoke grenades as the EDL kick off their demo in Bradford

ings in Dudley and Bolton – riots, blood, chaos. A few pubs are open early – it’s an economic recession and the promise of good business is too appealing. Sure enough, as soon as the first gangs of EDL “activists” disembark from their coaches they march straight for the Aristocrat pub – hurling abuse at journalists and police officers on their way past., shoving and spitting on a photographer as they swaggered past. By midday, hundreds of EDL have gathered outside two pubs, many have brought their own shopping bags full of cans of cheap lager. An hour later, many of them are drunk and incredibly loud; this. They claim to oppose neo-Nazis yet many of them playfully demonstrate Nazi salutes while chanting hideously racist songs. It’s uncomfortable to witness. Reporters and police officers hold their breath as a young Asian man, on his own, walks up to the mob. He stops. He gets out a camera-phone and begins recording what by this point is a rowdy drunken mob. They don’t

like this, and they definitely don’t like him. The EDL is manipulative and almost sophisticated in the way it portrays itself and manages its publicity. Attending their “demonstrations” however is when you witness their true colours. The mob hurls racist abuse at the Asian man. He is spat on, beer is thrown over him and one man launches an ambitious yet badly planned flying-kick at him. The police encourage him to leave the area for his own safety as a foul-mouthed drunken woman yells “yeah, fuck off you fucking Paki, this is England not fucking Paki-Land!” Back in Bradford the media have been allowed back into an area from which they can safely report after riot police push the EDL back into their pen where there is less stones and debris to throw. As I eat my freshly baked cookie – bought with the generously-donated pound coin – I’m reminded of a recent visit to London Zoo where the

monkeys were having a great time throwing around stones and poo whilst howling at invisible enemies. All that was missing for it to be a perfect comparison were the EDL hooded tops. I’d given up taking pictures and instead sat and listened to the imaginative and poetic chants of the nearby rabble: “Allah is a paedo, shove your Allah up your arse...” and so on.

The issue here is not radical Islam, the Taliban or al-Qaeda – none of these things

Above and left: The EDL spread their anti-Islam message in Bradford. Police often have to separate EDL supporters from local Asians or anti-fascist groups staging counter-demonstrations



Above: English Defence League supporters, many drunk and violent, attempt to break through police lines in Ayelsbury. Police respond with baton charges and horses to restore order

have been proven to be a particularly big problem in England. It is simply the growing atmosphere of xenophobia, and re-emerging racism in our society. Many EDL members have proven links to fascist organisations such as The National Front and neo-Nazi groups – racist and violent gangs which used to terrorise immigrants and asylum seekers in Britain.

More recently, they have been linked to the controversial British National Party, a far-right political group which opposes all immigration into the UK and advocates a policy of deporting ethnic minorities. The BNP have attempted to distance themselves from a violent past and embrace mainstream politics, despite flopping at the last general election.

It's interesting to discuss the EDL with

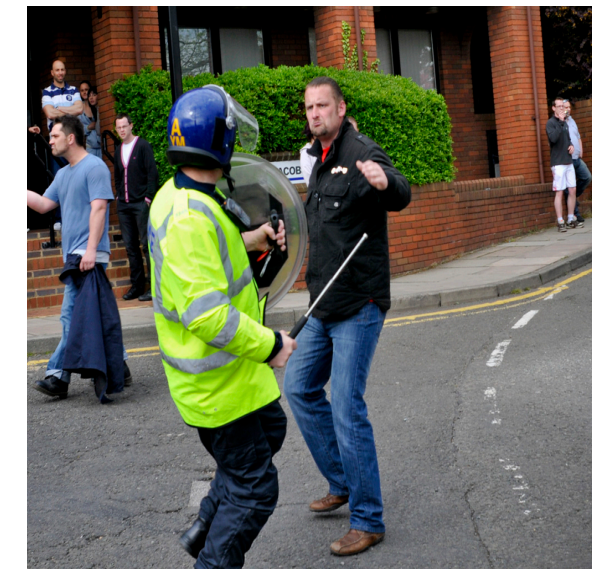
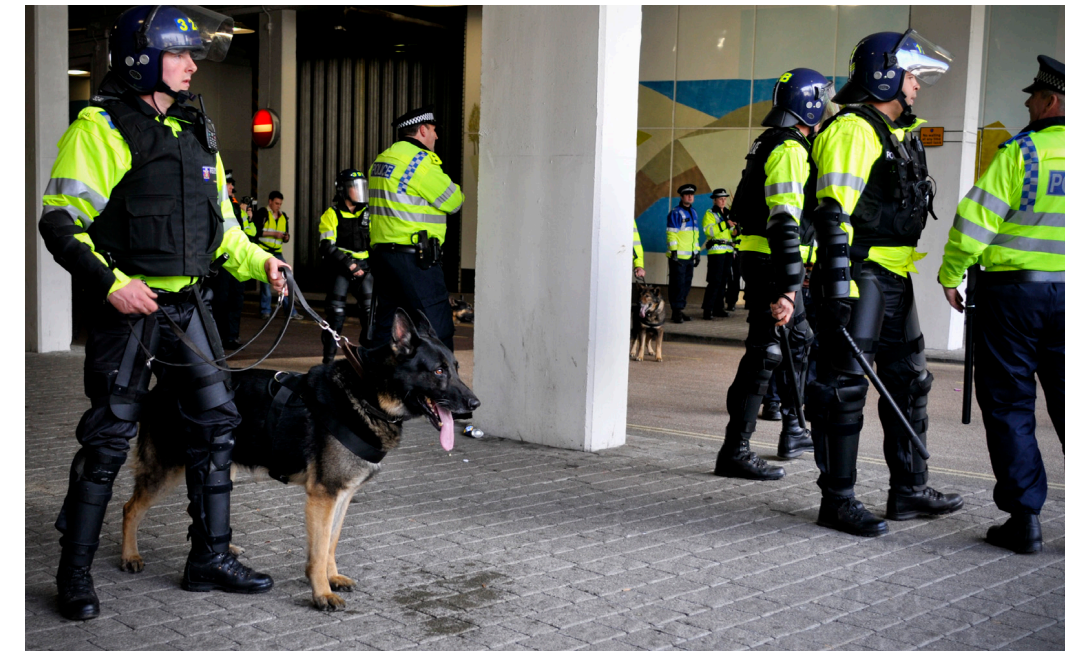
police officers, both serving and retired. Many of them are convinced that what we are witnessing in the growth of the EDL is simply football hooligans and thugs looking for a new platform from which to have a scrap with police. Forming the English Defence League and sensationalising the issue of radical Islam looks like an effort to legitimise and politicise their violent behaviour. That said, it's fair to assume that not all EDL followers are brain-dead racists and some probably just want a platform to discuss what they would say are legitimate concerns about immigration and Islam in the UK.

The EDL and the BNP are easy groups to criticize and mock, but the failure of much journalism is failing to address the "Why?"



Left: EDL arrive at an almost abandoned Ayelsbury and head straight for the pub.

Below: Police dogs are deployed to contain the drunken and rowdy gangs of EDL supporters



Left: Violent EDL members are singled out for arrest by police snatch squads while riot police prevent EDL supporters from entering local neighborhoods



Above: An English Defence League supporter argues with a police officer. The police are often abused by the EDL for being unpatriotic



Right: A young EDL supporter waves the English flag over the main square in Ayelsbury. Locals abandoned the town for the day, fearful of the destruction and violence which often follows the EDL



Perhaps the EDL is a product of the political class in Britain which has for so long refused to discuss the population's concerns about immigration for fear of being branded racist or xenophobic. It's possible they are a product of the brutal and bloody wars we continue to wage in the middle-east and they really do believe that they are defending England from hordes of evil, radical Jihadists. Perhaps it's a disenfranchised, poorly educated and neglected working class trying to find its voice. Maybe they are simply

gangs of violent football hooligans who enjoy fighting and have been whipped up into an anti-immigration and anti-Islamic rage by the blind hysteria of right-wing media. After following and documenting the rise of the EDL and BNP for some time I think the reality is that they are a product of all of the above and the blame for their existence cannot lay just with them.

However much we may enjoy philosophising about the reasons behind the existence of the EDL and distributing the blame,

most importantly they - and the BNP - must be taken at face value and judged not by their "mission statement" - which seems all fluffy and patriotic - but by their actions. And despite what may be noble (if slightly deluded) intentions, we cannot ignore that everywhere the EDL and BNP go, racism, xenophobia, civil-unrest and occasionally full-scale rioting follow.

The EDL and BNP claim to be fighting for English values and attempting to reclaim their country (despite it still being

90% white-British) when in reality they are spreading the exact opposite of English values. With the help of tabloid mass-market daily newspapers such as the *Mail*, *Star* and *Express* they are spreading fear, paranoia, hatred, intolerance and ultimately racism. At their "demonstrations" they are far more interested in attacking police, local Asians and reporters than making any kind of coherent political statement.

They claim to be pro-democracy and in favour of freedom of speech, yet journal-

EDL supporters hurl abuse and beer cans at an Asian man. He was also spat on, kicked and called a 'Paki'



Above: Any appearance by the British National Party in London attracts passionate and organised counter-demonstrations. The BNP are a mainstream political party in the UK despite their openly racist policies

ists who criticise them or simply cover their events are assaulted and have been sent death threats.

After the Asian man was assaulted in Ayelsbury, thousands of EDL supporters marched to the derelict and boarded up town centre. There they bellowed and ranted to nobody except themselves, the police and a few assembled journalists – locals mostly stayed at home, people generally hate it when the EDL hijack their town for an ideology most English despise. Predictably the mob descended into violence; horses and dogs had to be deployed by police – ultimately nothing was achieved despite the huge policing costs. It barely made the news.

As I watched the drunken EDL mob being herded back onto their chartered buses that had delivered them into the heart of

an unconsenting Ayelsbury, I desperately tried to remember a famous line spoken by Martin Luther King. I had to look it up when I got home, it read; “I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality.”

For as long as the EDL and the BNP have their way and for as long as we live in perpetually scared and paranoid society, I fear it shall not become a reality in the United Kingdom.

Jack Laurenson is a freelance photojournalist and reporter based in London. His work focuses mostly on society, human rights and the environment. He is also a founding member of the Lacuna Media creative collective - www.lacunamedia.org



Left: BNP supporters turn out in Croydon to protest against immigration. They end up being vastly outnumbered by anti-fascists, however, and ultimately require police protection



A young boy attends the English Defence League demonstration in Ayelsbury, shortly before violence breaks out. Children and families are often encouraged to attend by the EDL

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