

Challenging the rise of the new 'far-right'

Stephen Lambert

Unlike the fascism of the inter-war years, Teesside University academic Paul Stocker argues in his book *English Uprising* that the re-emergence of the extreme populist right, manifested in a wave of brutal racist rioting in August, is a cultural rather than just an economic phenomenon.

Stocker provides a critical overview of the history of 20th-century British fascism. Unlike Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (BUF) Blackshirts in the 1930s, the spectacular rise of groups like the National Front and BNP was a direct response to post-war black Commonwealth immigration in the fifties and sixties. In 1967 the NF, a racialist party of the extreme right, was founded by the author Chesterton. Its main belief system was a redefinition of the 'real' British community in terms of colour. For the NF, whites were seen as 'true Brits'. Black and Asian minority ethnic groups weren't, and were blamed for social problems like unemployment and bad housing.

By 1979 the NF had lost a lot of its support, partly due to its thuggish skinhead image and street violence, and partly due to Mrs Thatcher's populist stance on overseas migration. By 1992 it fell into decline and was eclipsed by the British National Party. Till 2011 the BNP was the lead player on the extreme right and enjoyed modest success in council elections, particularly in the deprived outer-boroughs of London. By 2009 its leaders, Nick Griffin and Andrew Broms, were elected to the European Parliament for the first time.

By 2012 the rapid rise of UKIP, although not a fascist party, represented the 'further mainstreaming' of ideas popularised by the BNP. As Nigel Farage, UKIP's former leader, boasted: 'We've taken a third of the BNP vote and I'm quite proud of that'.

Currently the new far-right is splintered into a number of groups, ranging from the English Defence League to Britain First and Patriotic Alternative. Britain First, led by Paul Golding, sees itself as the successor to the BNP, with a blend of far-right streets protests and stunts like mosque 'invasions'.

It has an extensive presence on social media and its estimated 800 members have tried to whip up unrest in predominantly Muslim neighbourhoods. Its harmful on-line propaganda played a key role in the radicalisation of the convicted far-right terrorist Darren Osborne. Nick Lowles of the anti-racism charity Hope Not Hate said: 'The speed with which Osborne was radicalised was frightening'.

Patriotic Alternative, formed in 2019 by former BNP activist Mark Collett, has presented itself as an anti-migrant and 'white pride' organisation. Although one of its leaders was jailed for racial hatred it has kept a low profile in the wider context of the riots. One of the key contemporary figures of the new far-right, however, is Tommy Robinson, founder of the defunct English Defence League. Robinson is being investigated by the police for spreading on-line disinformation and being behind some of the riots which hit many towns across the UK, including Sunderland, Hartlepool and Middlesbrough.

Although the recent racist yobbish behaviour on our streets alarmed the vast majority of people, it received no public support, even amongst those who have concerns about the impact of migration on public services. Although racist attitudes and values were prevalent in the latter part of the 20th century, the UK is by and large a tolerant multi-ethnic and multiracial society. Research by Hope Not Hate notes that we've become more, not less, tolerant since 2011. Overtly racist opinions, as measured by surveys, have dropped significantly in the last two decades.

British Future, a thinktank, has pointed out that the UK enjoys a high level of integration compared to several European countries and the US. There has been a consistent fall in intergenerational racial prejudice and a gradual decline in ethnic residential segregation in cities and large towns.

However, there's some evidence that hard-right extremist elements are gaining a foothold in some urban 'left-out' communities. Following Brexit, the radical right-wing party Reform UK, which attracted over four million votes at the last general election, is

becoming increasingly racialised, with five elected MPs including Nigel Farage.

In 2017 the Government, with cross-party support, unveiled its Fundamental British Values (FBV) initiative, coupled with the launch of *Building A Stronger Britain*, part of the state's counter-extremism strategy, to address genuine concerns about the potential growth of far-right groups and 'Islamofascism' in local communities and in schools.

Although most schools and colleges have integrated FBVs into their systems of delivery, Ofsted noted that too often they are being taught in a piecemeal and ad hoc way. For a minority of poor white working-class young people their sense of disenchantment and alienation can easily be exploited by far-right extremists who 'promise a better tomorrow by scapegoating and blaming minorities today'.

Clearly educational providers have an important role in challenging extremism in the classroom, online and outside in the wider community. That's why it's vital that all schools re-emphasise the shared common values of democracy, tolerance, respect and the rule of law through the formal and the 'hidden' curriculum. Alistair Campbell, in his new book *But What Can I Do?*, has gone one step further, calling for the introduction of anti-fascist education as part of a universal civics programme across all schools.

Dr Stocker challenges an explicit economic explanation for the growth of new far right populism and civil unrest. Other experts point out that the core lesson from inter-war Britain is that this nativist populism only comes alive when government fails to address the anxieties of the dispossessed living in 'left-behind' and neglected post-industrial towns and coastal communities both in the North and elsewhere. Violence, thuggery and damage to property broke out in seven of England's most disadvantaged areas: Middlesbrough, Blackpool, Liverpool, Hartlepool, Hull, Manchester and Blackburn.

As former chair of the Social Mobility Commission Alan Milburn warned four years ago, a failure to bridge an unequal society, stem industrial decline, tackle stagnant incomes and a sense of political alienation could fuel support for a proto-fascist solution through new far right movements or hard left totalitarian groups in some parts of our divided and fractured post-Brexit nation.

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For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.

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