



# University of HUDDERSFIELD

## University of Huddersfield Repository

Busher, Joel

'There are none sicker than the EDL': Narratives of racialisation and resentment from Whitehall and Eltham, London

### Original Citation

Busher, Joel (2012) 'There are none sicker than the EDL': Narratives of racialisation and resentment from Whitehall and Eltham, London. In: *The English riots of 2011: A summer of discontent*. Waterside Press, Hook, Hampshire, UK, pp. 237-258. ISBN 9781904380887

This version is available at <http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/id/eprint/14309/>

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

- The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
- A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
- The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: [E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk](mailto:E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk).

<http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/>

**To Cite: Busher, J. (2012) 'There are none sicker than the EDL': Narratives of racialisation and resentment from Whitehall and Eltham, London' in Daniel Briggs (ed.) *The English Riots of 2011: A summer of discontent*. Waterside Press, Hook. Pp 237-256**

## **Introduction**

From the evening of Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> August onwards, several groups of local residents had begun to mobilise in different parts of London in order to protect their neighbourhoods against rioting and looting. While the authorities moved to discourage vigilantism, social media such as Twitter and Facebook buzzed with largely celebratory reports of the Sikh community in Southall and of the shopkeepers and residents in Dalston and Haringay, many of whom were Turkish, who were reported to have deterred or chased off looters. On Tuesday afternoon reports also started to emerge that crowds, between 200 and 800 strong, had gathered in Eltham in South London and Enfield in North London. This time, however, the scene was rather different and so too were the politics that would quickly surround these events as it became apparent that the crowds comprised at least in part of a combination of members of local football firms<sup>1</sup> (mainly Millwall in the case of Eltham, Tottenham Hotspur in the case of Enfield) and the English Defence League (EDL). There were even claims that what purported to be a defence of local communities in Eltham was being organised by the EDL; one senior EDL activist at the time, who identified himself as 'Jack England', said in an interview to *The Telegraph* (10<sup>th</sup> August, 2011):

*The police are unable to control the streets. Today, these are local people [from Eltham], not EDL, they are patriots that have come out to defend their area. So the EDL has come down, about 50 of us to manage them and control them and to sort of guide them to make sure they don't move out of order.*

That Tuesday afternoon and evening, these crowds patrolled Eltham High Street for several hours and footage soon appeared on YouTube of people in Eltham chanting 'E-E-EDL' (see Video A). Some of the crowd were drinking heavily, and after a number of fairly minor public order incidents, the police dispersed the crowd, issuing some people with instructions not to return to the area within 48 hours under section 27 of the Violent Crime Reduction Act. Despite this, the following night another crowd assembled and there were similar suggestions that the EDL were involved (*The Guardian Blog*, 10<sup>th</sup> Aug 2011). As one of the local EDL organisers posted on Facebook:

### [English Defence League - London Region](#)

*The Barnet meeting has been canceled [sic<sup>2</sup>] tonight as we need people on the street to defend the innocent people & business which may come under attack by criminals. We have drafted in several hundred more EDL enforcement officers from outside London to help out in these times of crisis. Please, show our respect to the police & local communities as we protect and serve ENGLAND.*

[10 August at 18:50](#)

(Accessed from Facebook, 28<sup>th</sup> December 2011)

---

<sup>1</sup> People associated with football-related violence.

<sup>2</sup> All Facebook posts have been left with their original spelling and grammar

This time, although the crowd was smaller – estimated to be no more than 200-300 - there was a far larger police presence, with ratios as high as four officers to every crowd member (*The Guardian* Blog, 10<sup>th</sup> August 2011). The rapport between the crowd and the police was also more hostile than the preceding evening and bottles were thrown at the police, who responded with baton charges.

In this chapter I revisit these events. I start the chapter by describing the EDL involvement in the crowds that gathered in Eltham and the response that stories about EDL involvement elicited from the media, police and politicians. I then consider how this short sequence of events was both shaped by and has been situated within a) media and mainstream political narratives about the threat of the far right in Britain, and b) the counter-narratives of EDL activists and supporters and their claims about victimisation at the hands of the state and of mainstream media. In doing so, this chapter provides a further example of how the riots and events surrounding the riots provided a stage on which contemporary social divisions were played out.

In August 2011, I happened to be mid-way through 16 months of ethnographic research about EDL activism in London and the Southeast. This chapter makes use of a combination of field-notes from meetings and informal conversations with EDL activists around the time of the riots; narrative interviews five months after the riots with two EDL activists who were in Eltham on both Tuesday and Wednesday; public interviews given by EDL activists at the time; and Facebook discussions between activists.

### **EDL involvement in the Eltham mobilisation**

Since 2009, the EDL has become one of the UK's most controversial social movements. Its leadership, and many of the movement's activists, describe themselves as a peaceful protest group who are opposed only to the spread of 'militant Islam' and have sought to distance themselves from the 'traditional' far right and the racial violence associated with groups such as the National Front (Busher, forthcoming; Copey, 2010; Jackson, 2011). However, EDL demonstrations have been marked by a number of instances of public disorder and some people who identify as EDL activists have been charged with undertaking religiously-aggravated crimes against Muslims. Certainly counter-EDL groups have rejected the EDL claims that it is a peaceful and legitimate protest movement, while most commentators in the mainstream media have also persisted in using adjectives like 'far right' or 'racist' when referring to the EDL. The police and Home Office also continue to keep a close eye on the movement due mainly to concerns about public disorder.

When the riots started to spread across London, EDL activists expressed opposing views on whether the group should intervene. However, at least initially the position of the local leadership was that this was not a matter in which the EDL ought to be directly involved:

#### [English Defence League - London Region](#)

*In light of todays events, we have closed the [Facebook] wall for posting. Please let the Police do their job, and stay away from any trouble areas. This is a public order issue, and not the concern of the EDL. As a Londoner I am horrified and saddened by todays events (as we all are), if you require and further clarification - please contact your division leaders (6)*

[8 August at 21:28](#)

(Accessed from Facebook, 28<sup>th</sup> December 2011)

This position was not without its critics within the movement. Some activists opined that somebody had to do something, and that perhaps the EDL were as able as anyone to organise groups to protect local neighbourhoods. In the four months prior to the riots, the EDL had undergone a reorganisation in London and there were by this time several active borough-level EDL divisions that, it was suggested, could easily gather a group of around 50 people who would be willing to defend shops and other buildings. This was the response to the post cited above:

[NAME](#)

*im as digusted as u about whats going on. as londoners i feels its our duty to protect our neighbourhoods, towns n cities.*

*8 August at 21:32*

[English Defence League - London Region](#)

*I understand your anger NAME, but the EDL is not a vigilante group (6)*

*8 August at 21:42*

[NAME](#)

*It's shocking it's a shame as a group we the EDL can't do anything it saddens me to see what our country is going through so sad*

*8 August at 21:45*

However, for the time being the EDL's position did not change, and broadly speaking the decision not to intervene was supported by activists in and around London. This was partly linked to a number of strategic considerations at the time. As the comments above indicate, there was some debate about the extent to which responding to the riots fitted with the EDL mission, and in recent months there had been growing calls from within the EDL activist community for the movement to retain what was seen to be its original focus: protesting against 'militant Islam'. A number of activists also pointed out that their involvement could further sour relations with the police – something EDL activists were keen to avoid as they had demonstrations planned for the near future. Furthermore, activists were also aware of how easily any response by the EDL to the riots could be framed in such a way as to be used as evidence that the EDL was, after all, a racist movement – an issue of considerable concern to people who had by this point spent more than two years trying to persuade the public and the media that they were neither 'extreme right wing' nor 'racist'.

This situation did begin to change, however, when locals and football casuals came together in Enfield and Eltham on Tuesday. From a strategic point of view, these mobilisations presented what promised to be a good and timely opportunity to network with one of the EDL's main constituencies: football casuals. EDL activists in London were already gearing up to distribute several thousand flyers, many of them to football fans in and around London, in the run up to their planned demonstration in Tower Hamlets at the beginning of September 2011. There were also some activists, like Jack, who saw these mobilisations as an opportunity for a wider public-relations coup, particularly as it seemed by this point that public opinion had swung quite firmly behind the groups that were gathering ostensibly to protect their neighbourhoods.

At this point, it is worth noting however that this shift in position was not mitigated only by such strategic considerations but also by basic psycho-social factors. This seems particularly to have been the case among EDL activists local to Eltham whom I spoke with who argued vehemently that they had gone out on the high street not 'as EDL' at all (they weren't for example wearing 'colours' – EDL merchandise) but as local residents. For these people, the riots had arrived at their doorstep; they had strong social and cultural ties with the crowd gathering on Eltham High Street; there was something visceral about 'reclaiming the streets' after the chaos and disorder that had gripped London for the last three days and nights; and then there was the sheer buzz and excitement of simply being part of the crowd (see also Sampson, 2011). Whatever the strategic considerations of movement organisers may have been, local activists had no intention of missing out on this:

*I was, I was out working, phone goes. My wife's told me that the boy [his son] and some of his mates had decided that they were going to come up to Eltham and protect Eltham, in fact she said they were already up there, this was in the afternoon. Err, I'd been out since about half past three in the morning, got in about half past six, nobody indoors, wife was out, as she normally is on a Tuesday night. I phoned and she told me to stay indoors because there was about 300 or 400 people up there all protecting the High Street [laughs] which ... that was, na I can't stay away from that! I've gone up there and see if I can find the boy and everything else, when I got up here there was 200 people milling about...*  
(Dave<sup>3</sup>, EDL activist, 19<sup>th</sup> Jan 2012)

The evidence suggests, however, that in spite of the obvious allure of these crowds, the number of regular EDL activists who went up to Eltham High Street was some way short of the 50 that Jack had claimed. In and around London, there is only a core of approximately 200-300 activists who frequently attend demonstrations and other events, most of whom recognise one another. Of these people, independent estimates from five sources, three of whom were present in Eltham on Tuesday and Wednesday, put the numbers at around eight to ten on Tuesday, and less than this on Wednesday (numbers also in line with comments circulating among members of the Millwall casuals communities). Of these, at least four were from Eltham and one of the others had only travelled the five miles from Bexley Heath.

When pressed about the video footage that showed people chanting 'E-E-EDL', local EDL activists were dismissive, arguing that most of the people that had been chanting 'EDL' had no involvement with the movement and were just joining in with what was going on around them. They even claimed that 'EDL' was not referring to the *English* Defence League but, in a rather tongue-in-cheek way, to the '*Eltham* Defence League' - a claim repeated several times in conversations with EDL activists and some football casuals after the events. One activist said:

*They were just using the EDL as jumping on a band wagon, and it turned out they were using the 'EDL' as the 'Eltham Defence League' .... All the people up there walking down the streets going 'E-E-EDL' and 'England belongs to me' and all that, like doing all the EDL songs, that was Jack [see above] that started that because he was going up to all the reporters saying*

---

<sup>3</sup> All respondent names used in this chapter are pseudonyms.

*'yeah, we're the EDL, we're here and we're here to protect everything' ... and then everybody else started singing all the songs and he's marching up and down the road like he's the leader*

*(Terry, EDL activist, 19<sup>th</sup> Jan 2012)*

In addition, even though Jack had clearly sought to take a lead in events, local EDL activists were dismissive of the idea that, as a group, they had been involved in organising the crowd<sup>4</sup>, or for that matter that anybody could really have been said to have been *in control* of these events. Instead, they described crowds of people *'running up and down the road like chickens'* in response to rumours that swept through the crowd about the approach of *'the Lewisham boys'*<sup>5</sup> (Terry, EDL activist, 19<sup>th</sup> Jan 2012), or people going *'hell for leather'* following the latest police car to go *'roaring'* by with its sirens blazing (Dave, EDL activist, 19<sup>th</sup> Jan 2012). One local activist also observed that Jack's claims about the EDL's organising role were giving some other people in the crowd the *'hump'* (especially some of the Millwall lads) because they did not want to be associated with the EDL; an account that again tallies with some of the discussion on football casuals forums in the weeks after the riots.

So, as is usually the case with events involving the EDL, there are a number of differing accounts of what happened in Eltham on Tuesday and Wednesday. Based on the available evidence though, it would seem that the scale of EDL involvement in the crowds in Eltham was probably somewhat smaller than was indicated by Jack or reported through news media at the time. There was also some reluctance both from within the EDL community and from some other parts of the crowds which gathered in Eltham for the EDL to take a lead in this mobilisation, and there were certainly differing views among EDL activists about how they should present their role in these crowds. This would appear to be linked to the fact that whilst some EDL activists may have seen this as an opportunity to expand activist networks, others were there for a number of reasons including the simple pleasures of being part of the crowd. However, whatever the 'truths' may be about the EDL's involvement in the crowds in Eltham, whether intentionally or not, reports that EDL activists were descending on Eltham tapped into a number of fears circulating at the time of the riots.

### **Framing the events: The threat of 'racialisation' and the far right**

The issue of race hung heavy in the air during public discussions about the riots in London and elsewhere in England. News of the crowds in Enfield and Eltham, and speculation about the involvement of the EDL seemed therefore to resonate with wider political concerns that the riots could yet be racialised, and that this could be exploited by far right groups keen to exacerbate extant community tensions around racial and religious differences. Such concerns were, for example, articulated by Clive Efford, MP for Eltham, in the House of Commons on Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> August:

*For the last two nights in my constituency I've had a very, very heavy police presence due to right wing extremist groups focusing on Eltham and trying to create unrest and bad-feeling between different racial groups. Whilst we want to support people who are public spirited and coming out to defend their community, like some of my constituents have done, would*

---

<sup>4</sup> A view also supported by the comments of the locals and Millwall casuals who spoke to the media during these events.

<sup>5</sup> A reference to the groups of lads from Lewisham that, it was feared, would come up to Eltham.

*the Prime Minister join me in saying to those people, 'don't be diverted from your efforts by the extremists seeking to exploit this situation'?*  
(Clive Efford, MP for Eltham, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2011, Video B)

The fact that these mobilisations provoked, or at least provided a focus for, the expression of such concerns is not surprising, particularly in light of the (probably exaggerated) reports which surfaced about the possible extent of the EDL involvement. By Tuesday there were also a number of video clips and anecdotes of skirmishes that hinted at the prospect of racially-aggravated violence in Eltham and Enfield: a video showed a group of white men shouting and throwing objects at a stationary bus containing black youths in Eltham (*Telegraph*, 10<sup>th</sup> August) and reports appeared of white men chasing after 'blacks' and 'pakis' in Enfield (*Guardian Blog*, 9<sup>th</sup> August 2011). The fact that one of these mobilisations was taking place in Eltham lent these events additional symbolic potency of which the media, politicians and, as I discuss later, members of the crowds in the High Street were aware. This is because, much to the chagrin of many Eltham residents, the area has acquired a special place within the politics surrounding racism and anti-racism as the site of the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 (Hewitt, 2005). The timing was particularly unfortunate, with the trial of two of the people accused of the murder of Stephen Lawrence just weeks away.

Then there was also the prevailing view of the EDL and the threat it might pose within an already volatile situation, in which police resources were stretched to the limit, public order seemed unusually fragile, and with community tensions accentuated by fears of further violence and unrest. And at the time of the riots, media and political interest in the EDL was particularly acute. Just two weeks before the riots, Anders Behring Breivik had killed 77 people in Norway, and allegations had since emerged about his links to the EDL. This had generated something of a moral panic about the threat of the 'far right' in the UK. It had left photographers scouring their archives for the money shot of Breivik at an EDL event, journalists and anti-EDL campaigners playing a frantic join-the-dots exercise in the hope of revealing these links, and civil servants and police scrambling to put in place a credible and blame-proof response to the perceived threat of the EDL. To compound matters further, less than three weeks after the riots, the EDL's proposed march through Tower Hamlets was to take it through the home of one of the UK's largest Muslim populations. The march was also to pass Cable Street, one of the most iconic sites in the history of the struggles between the left and the right in Britain, where Mosley's black-shirts were famously denied passage through London's ethnically diverse East End in 1936. The rhetoric from the EDL and from their opponents was therefore already approaching fever pitch.

Given this social and historical context, there was a certain inevitability about the fact that these events would be framed in terms of the risk of their exploitation by the EDL, and the threat of mounting racial tensions. Yet whilst there may have been some kernels of truth within such an interpretation, it risks skating over an interesting and salient point. Rather than encouraging and contributing to the use of racial discourses, there actually appeared to be a concerted effort on the part of members of the crowd gathered in Eltham, and on the part of participating EDL activists who had joined them, to resist the use of such discourses.

The fact that racial discourses were being resisted does not of course mean that racial tensions were absent, nor that EDL involvement could not in some way exacerbate racial tensions. However, whilst

some EDL activists may have been seeking to capitalise on this situation in order to expand their activist networks, there was little evidence of overt attempts by the EDL or by other parties on Eltham High Street to *'deliberately create unrest and bad-feeling between different racial groups'* as Clive Efford had stated.

### **Resisting discourses of race**

As the riots unfolded, it seemed everyone in London was talking about them; there were questions, conversations, arguments and debates about what was causing them, what they represented for society and what should be done to stop them. Individuals and groups from all walks of life were anchoring the dramatic scenes provided by the riots into their pre-existing theories about the world and about the changes underway in contemporary Britain (see Chakroborty, 2011). This was also true of the EDL activist community, even though it quickly became clear that the riots could not easily be incorporated within their main narrative about the threat of 'militant Islam'. So whilst 'left-wingers' interpreted the riots as being at least in part a reflection of what happens when youth services are cut and police use strong-arm tactics, so EDL activists articulated their own set of explanations. For example, some EDL activists (and doubtless many others beyond the boundaries of this particular movement) directed blame towards what they described as years of public life dominated by 'liberalism' and woolly 'lefty do-gooders' (see also Philips 2011). For example, one activist posted:

#### [NAME](#)

*This is the result of years of Liberalism, no discipline in schools, powers taken away from parents and handed over to the kids, soft laws etc...The thugs rioting on the streets have grown up believing they are invincible. They see the authorities as having no teeth. The police fail to command respect, people don't respect what's seen as 'weakness'!...Well done Liberal, lefty do-gooders...Turn on your TV and look proudly at the 'MONSTER' you've created...You do-gooding, misguided fools!*

*8 August at 23:22*

(Accessed from Facebook, 28<sup>th</sup> December 2011)

Another theme that was predictably quick to emerge was about the pernicious effects of decades of mass immigration and 'multiculturalism'; the apparent 'failure' of which had been proclaimed recently by both David Cameron (BBC, 5<sup>th</sup> Feb 2011) and Angela Merkel (BBC, 17<sup>th</sup> October 2010). As one EDL activist posted:

#### [English Defence League - London Region](#)

*We are told by left-wing Politicians that multiculturalism is a success, really? Brixton as a flagship to promote how diversity works... Walthamstow is promoted as a place where muslims work with the community. How stupid & wrong are you expense stealing twits looking now? We seen 2 nights where muslims, anarchists & their thug friends are attacking London. When you destroy English culture with multiculturalism, instead people being proud and respecting their country they disrespect it (16)*

*8 August at 14:17*

(Accessed from Facebook, 28<sup>th</sup> December 2011)



It was easy to see how race could also surface as another prominent theme in these debates. Indeed, it threatened to do so on a number of occasions. For example, one Facebook comment about race and the riots (which was subsequently deleted by the EDL Facebook administrators) elicited the following response:

[NAME A](#)

*NAME B, the EDL Are not racist!*

*9 August at 00:46 · Like*

[NAME C](#)

*Getting UNBELIEVABLY hard not to be, isn't it??? They burn our home-land down and WE have to be very restrained and careful how we voice our opinions about it! Wake up my beloved England!*

*9 August at 00:51*

*(Accessed from Facebook, 28<sup>th</sup> December 2011)*

Similarly, during video footage from Eltham, there were a number of incidents in which somebody (in most cases not somebody from the EDL) makes a comment about race, only to be 'corrected' by one of their colleagues. Yet what is striking about these incidents is how consistently the encroachment of racial discourse was resisted, even when subjected to the probing of journalists, who seemed intent on asking questions around this theme. As one activist recalled:

*Terry: We had the reporters asking us if this was anything to do with race and all that, and we're like 'no it's got nothing to do with race, the rioters are black and white, we're just up here to stop them from coming up here to smash any shops up, because we don't want them up there', and they were trying to twist it to say that we were after the blacks. And we said well no, if any white people come up here and smash the shops up they're going to get done as well... [Then they asked us] 'why are we up here?', 'do you think it's the government's fault?' and 'why are they rioting?' And - well it is the government's fault - but the immigration, that's mainly what they were after for us to say something about immigration and things like that, but we tried not to.*

*Joel: And ... and you say that's what they were after...?*

*Terry: It was just the type of questions they were asking, you know, 'Do you think, is this about race?' 'Is this about blacks?' 'Is this about whites?' And we're like 'no, it's got nothing to do with race, this is not a black and white thing'. And they was like 'oh okay', and then they'd start asking the question another way round, and you're saying 'mate, no mate you've just asked ...'*

*(Terry, EDL activist, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2012)*

There are likely to have been a number of reasons that underpinned this kind of resistance to the use of racial discourse. There was probably a strategic element to it; a concerted effort at 'impression management' (Goffman, 1969), particularly in the case of the EDL activists given their ongoing attempts to refute accusations that the EDL is a racist movement. Some of this resistance might also be attributed to the fact that when people are presented with a journalist's camera or a

researcher's dictaphone they tend to say what they think will be received well by their anticipated audience. In addition, there is also a tendency for people to slip back into habitual discourses and well worn phrases when asked to articulate their position, so people who have spent a great deal of time attempting to distance themselves from racism may be likely to repeat their usual repertoire of arguments. These explanations in themselves are interesting as they would, if nothing else, seem to reflect broader shifts in public attitudes towards perceiving overt racism as socially unacceptable.

However, in this chapter I wish to draw attention to a further aspect of this resistance that comes to the fore in Terry's account of his interviews with the journalists. This aspect of resistance is about the construction of moral identity claims. His repeated assertions that the mobilisations in Eltham were 'nothing to do with race', made mandatory by the persistent probing of journalists, can also be read as a refusal to play the role that he and other members of the crowd in Eltham (including EDL activists) felt was being allocated to them by the media in this particular drama: that of the angry, working class whites teetering on the edge of racism.

As Roger Hewitt (2005) describes in great detail, there is, particularly in this part of London, longstanding resentment born of the feeling that certain communities have been portrayed by the media and by some mainstream politicians as being 'racist' or somehow especially prone to racism. As Dave, an Eltham resident and EDL activist complained:

*Because of [the murder of] Stephen Lawrence this area got such a bad name. I mean they virtually called us, we actually complained to Sky about it but they still virtually called us the racist capital of London. It is so, so wrong.*

(Dave, EDL activist, 19<sup>th</sup> January 2012)

As such, resistance to the encroachment of racial discourses into their accounts of the mobilisations in Eltham was invested with considerable symbolic meaning. It formed part of what Hewitt calls a '*counter-narrative*'; an extensive series of stories that anticipates and contests a more powerful and influential narrative that is broadly associated with the social and political elite and in which, EDL activists and others beyond the movement (see Hewitt, 2005) claim, they have been unfairly cast. Ironically, it was through the subsequent contestation of this counter-narrative and of these identity claims by the State that, at least for EDL activists and their supporters, the symbolic value of the events in Eltham was to be greatly amplified.

### **'Mr. Cameron, we are not sick'**

The protestations of EDL activists and other members of the crowd that the mobilisation in Eltham was 'nothing to do with race' and was not about inflaming racial tensions appeared to have been given short shrift by those in positions of public authority. First, there was the large and robust policing operation on Wednesday. Then, more importantly, David Cameron's response to Clive Efford's comments (cited earlier in the chapter):

*I think the honourable gentleman speaks not only for his constituents but frankly for the whole house in deprecating the EDL and all they stand for and their attempt to somehow say*

*that they are going to help restore order is: I've described some parts of our society as sick; and there are none sicker than the EDL.*

(David Cameron, 11<sup>th</sup> August 2011, see Video B)

Not surprisingly, these comments triggered a flurry of outrage from EDL activists, who quickly came to use them as an example both of the unwillingness of the political elite to listen to what they are actually saying, and of the efforts of the authorities and the media to '*discredit*' (Dave, EDL activist, 19<sup>th</sup> Jan 2012) the EDL. For example, one of several statements released by the EDL argued:

*We can't help but think that it was somewhat ironic for the man at the head of a political establishment that is so keen to accuse us of making unfair generalisations about a large group of people, to then utilise exactly the same tactics as we are accused of using against the Muslim community.*

(The English Defence League, 15<sup>th</sup> August 2011)

Of course, such arguments will have gained little purchase with the majority of people beyond the confines of the EDL and their supporters. However, in the months that followed, Cameron's comments have provided EDL activists and supporters with a particularly effective '*condensing symbol*' (Jasper, 2007), a memorable verbal encapsulation of the kind of simmering resentments that the EDL has become adept at using to expand and reinvigorate its support. They have provided the inspiration for countless placards on EDL demonstrations, and were used to generate support for a demonstration on 8<sup>th</sup> October 2011 when a group of EDL activists marched to Whitehall to tell Cameron that '*we are not sick*'. Even at the time of writing this chapter (February 2012), these comments still appear to provide a reliable rhetorical tool for EDL speakers at local and national demonstrations where a comment along the lines of '*some people have called us sick...*' invariably elicits a resounding set of boos from the crowd.

## **Discussion**

The involvement of the EDL in the crowd that gathered in Eltham and the response that this elicited from the media, police and politicians provided one of many sub-plots which developed during the course of the riots in London. The precise nature of EDL activists' involvement in Eltham remains somewhat shrouded in conflicting accounts of these events, although the available evidence would suggest that the scale of EDL mobilisation and the role played by EDL activists was considerably smaller than was initially claimed by 'Jack England' and reported by the news media. Yet what these events did, like many others taking place at the time of the riots, was bring into focus some of the social divisions running through contemporary British society. However, and somewhat contrary to the media and political narrative that emerged at the time, the divisions highlighted by this particular sequence of events may be less to do with race *per sé*, than with the politics of racism and anti-racism, and how this intersects with the sense of social and political marginalisation within some parts of white working-class Britain.

The presence of EDL activists in Eltham was quickly and easily framed by political leaders and parts of the media within discourses about the threat of racial violence and the extreme right wing. This was hardly surprising given the reputation of the EDL, the moral panic at the time about the far right and the underlying concerns about the possible racialisation of the riots. Yet while some EDL

activists may indeed have sought to exploit these events in order to build public support for the EDL and expand activist networks, there was little evidence to suggest that EDL activists, or other members of the crowds, were trying to stir up racial tensions at the time of the riots. Instead, there was a concerted effort on their part to avoid using racialised frames to describe their actions.

It is of course necessary to acknowledge that there are likely to be multiple explanations for this resistance to the use of racial discourses, and doubtless questions may be asked about the extent to which claims about the mobilisation being 'nothing to do with race' were made in good faith. What I argue in this chapter, however, is that this resistance acquired considerable symbolic significance because of the way that it tapped into longstanding bitterness about what EDL activists, and many others beyond the boundaries of this movement (Hewitt, 2005), perceive as the unfair characterisation of them and their communities as being especially prone to racism. It was this that has made Cameron's hyperbolic rebuttal of their moral claims such an effective condensing symbol for EDL activists, who have since used it to nourish precisely the kind of resentments on which the movement has so far thrived. There are, as Novak observed, '*few quicker ways to stoke smouldering resentment and to awaken an unendurable inner hatred than to look down upon others from some moral height*' (Novak p13, cited in Hewitt 2005 p130).

Fortunately, the riots in London and the mobilisations in Enfield and Eltham did not result in a proliferation of racially aggravated violence. They did, however, provide another chapter in an ongoing sub-political struggle centred on the contestation of moral identities and grounded in the tense and at times accusatory politics of anti-racism and anti-extremism.

## References

BBC, (5th Feb 2011). 'State multiculturalism has failed, says David Cameron'. Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> Feb 2012 from [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12371994](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-12371994)

BBC, (17<sup>th</sup> Oct 2010). 'Merkel says German multicultural society has failed'. Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> Feb 2012 from [www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11559451](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-11559451)

Busher, J., (Forthcoming). 'Grassroots Activism in the English Defence League: Discourse, identity and performance'. In *Extreme Right Wing Political Violence and Terrorism*, edited by Max Taylor, Mark Currie & Donald Holbrook. London: Continuum Press

Copsey, N., (2010). *The English Defence League: Challenging our country and our values of social inclusion, fairness and equality*. London: Faith Matters

Chakroborty, A., (2011) 'UK riots: political classes see what they want to see'. *The Guardian*, 10<sup>th</sup> Aug 2011. Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> Feb from [www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/10/uk-riots-political-classes](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/aug/10/uk-riots-political-classes)

English Defence League (2011). 'Tommy Robinson: the extremist that makes David Cameron sick'. Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> December 2011 from <http://englishdefenceleague.org/tommy-robinson-%E2%80%93-the-extremist-that-makes-david-cameron-sick/>

Goffman, E., (1969). *Strategic interaction*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press

*The Guardian* Blog (9<sup>th</sup> August 2011). Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> December 2011 from [www.guardian.co.uk/uk/blog/2011/aug/09/london-riots-day-four-live-blog?INTCMP=SRCH#block-98](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/blog/2011/aug/09/london-riots-day-four-live-blog?INTCMP=SRCH#block-98)

*The Guardian* Blog (10<sup>th</sup> August 2011). Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> December 2011 from [www.guardian.co.uk/uk/blog/2011/aug/10/uk-riots-fifth-night-live](http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/blog/2011/aug/10/uk-riots-fifth-night-live)

Hewitt, R., (2005). *White backlash and the politics of multiculturalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Jackson, P., (2011). *The EDL: Britain's 'new far right' movement*. Northampton: RNM Publications

Jasper, J.M., (2007). *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, biography and creativity in social movements*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press

Novak, M., (1972). *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: politics and culture in the seventies*. New York: Macmillan Publishing Co.

Phillips, M., (2011). 'Britain's liberal intelligentsia has smashed virtually every social value'. *The Daily Mail*, 11<sup>th</sup> Aug 2011. Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> Feb 2012 from [www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2024690/UK-riots-2011-Britains-liberal-intelligentsia-smashed-virtually-social-value.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/debate/article-2024690/UK-riots-2011-Britains-liberal-intelligentsia-smashed-virtually-social-value.html)

Sampson, K., (2011). 'Liverpool riots: I remember the buzz of mob mayhem from 1981'. *The Guardian*, 10<sup>th</sup> August 2011. Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> Feb 2012 from [www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/aug/10/liverpool-riots-mob-mayhem](http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/aug/10/liverpool-riots-mob-mayhem)

*The Telegraph*, (10<sup>th</sup> August 2011). Accessed 28<sup>th</sup> December 2011 from [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8692872/London-riots-far-right-political-party-protect-Eltham-residents.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8692872/London-riots-far-right-political-party-protect-Eltham-residents.html)

Video A. Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> February 2012 from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeX8y0JQNqI&feature=share](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeX8y0JQNqI&feature=share)

Video B. Accessed 16<sup>th</sup> February 2012 [www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0kqrSaTXR8](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0kqrSaTXR8)