Britain's far right and the summer 2024 riots: a journalist's account

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In late July and early August 2024, the United Kingdom saw racist rioting and demonstrations in 27 towns and cities (House of Commons Library, 2024), mostly in England. In terms of scale, its closest historical parallels in this country probably date back to 1947, which saw attacks on Jewish-owned businesses after two British army sergeants were killed in Mandate Palestine (Trilling, 2012a) – or even 1919, when rioters targeted Black and Asian seamen living in the UK's port cities (Pascoe, 2024). Last year, the immediate trigger was the murder of three young girls in Southport, Merseyside, by a perpetrator the rioters incorrectly believed to be either Muslim or an asylum-seeker. In Southport itself, a mob tried to attack the local mosque (BBC News, 2024a). In Rotherham, Yorkshire, another mob attempted to set fire to a hotel housing asylum-seekers while the residents were still inside (BBC News, 2024b). In Hull, also in Yorkshire, a group of Romanian men driving through the town were set upon in their car (Mistry, 2024). In Belfast, a Syrian supermarket was firebombed (Middle East Eye, 2024) while elsewhere in England rioters fought with police, chanted slogans such as "we want our country back" and assaulted members of the public.

The riots were unusually widespread, and seemed largely spontaneous. But they can also be seen as the culmination of more than a decade of developments in British politics. On the face of it, over the long term, far-right politics in the UK has moved away from violent extremism. The political scientist Cas Mudde (2019) divides the far right into two parts: the extreme right, which rejects democracy (and is therefore more likely to view violence as a legitimate political tool), and the radical right, which is hostile to key aspects of liberal democratic political systems but accepts the basic principles of democracy. For decades after the Second World War, the most prominent far right current in British politics derived from the fascist tradition. Groups like the National Front, which peaked in the 1970s, were founded and led by activists who were inspired by the ideas – and the violence – of Hitler and Mussolini and sought to revive a version of their movements (Macklin, 2019). These groups were rarely more than marginal to British politics; the most successful electorally of this post-war fascist tradition was the British National Party – BNP – which won scores

of seats in local government in England during the 2000s, before disintegrating in 2010 (Trilling, 2012b).

Founded in the early 1980s by John Tyndall, a veteran neo-Nazi, for many years the BNP followed the standard pattern among Britain's post-war fascists (Trilling, 2012b). Its platform centred on a demand for the "repatriation" of non-white British citizens and immigrants, while its campaigning largely involved rallies and marches, accompanied by violence targeting ethnic minorities and the left. (The international neo-Nazi terrorist network Combat 18 began life in 1992 as the stewarding arm of the BNP.) But it only started to win elections when it adopted populism, the political style favoured by today's radical right, which claims to be the authentic representative of the people in contrast to existing, allegedly corrupt governing elites.

From the late 1990s, under the new leadership of Nick Griffin, the BNP concealed its core beliefs and crafted a more moderate, professional public image, taking inspiration from the French Front National (Trilling, 2012b). It found success in small, former industrial towns in England that had lost out economically under neoliberalism, and whose white residents were encouraged to blame immigration for perceived national decline (Trilling, 2012b). The BNP's real contribution was to break a long-standing taboo on the far right's inclusion in mainstream British politics – after the BNP won two seats in the European Parliament in 2009, Griffin was invited to appear on Question Time, the BBC's flagship current affairs programme – and to demonstrate the potential for a radical right movement without the BNP's neo-Nazi baggage.

Since then, far-right populism has been employed to much greater effect by Nigel Farage, who is now one of Britain's most prominent politicians. His various projects – the UK Independence Party, which he led between 2006 and 2016, the Brexit Party, which stood candidates in the 2019 general election, and now Reform UK, which won 5 seats in parliament at election 2024 – have built a much wider coalition of support among Britain's working and middle classes. Like elsewhere in Europe, you can read various economic ills into the growth of far-right populism in the UK. Wages and social mobility have both stalled since the 2008 financial crisis (Social Mobility Commission, 2017), while austerity policies during the 2010s have contributed to a crumbling public realm (Channel 4 News, 2023). This is a breeding ground for the kind of resentment – of immigrants and others believed to be gaining an unfair advantage in society, or of political elites – on which far-right populism thrives. Until 2016, these governments largely tried to manage that resentment by assuring voters that they were sufficiently punishing the 'undeserving poor.' Cuts to the welfare state were promoted as cracking down on "shirkers" unwilling to work for a living (Jowit, 2013). Meanwhile the UK Home Office – the country's interior ministry – rolled out a set of policies, known as the "hostile environment", that were intended to make life so unpleasant for undocumented immigrants that they would

leave of their own accord (Taylor, 2022). The message was further reinforced by a Home Office publicity campaign in 2013, in which advertising vans drove around multicultural areas of London, emblazoned with the message "In the UK illegally? Go home or face arrest".

That did not stave off far-right populism however, which was also buoyed by an evolving media ecosystem that combined sympathetic coverage from the traditional right-wing press with increasingly prominent far-right online news outlets, such as the UK arm of the American far-right website Breitbart (Gais & Wilson, 2022). In 2016 – as the UK neared what social geographer Danny Dorling (2018) describes as "peak inequality" – far-right populism was a major component in the successful campaign for a "Leave" vote in Britain's referendum on membership of the European Union – EU. There is nothing inherently right-wing in deciding to quit a supra-national economic and political bloc, of course. But Leave campaigners such as Farage tied resentment at the remote and often unaccountable workings of the EU to wider resentment of immigration, encouraging a sense of existential national threat. For instance, shortly before election day, Farage unveiled a campaign poster with the slogan "breaking point" superimposed on a photo of refugees from Syria and elsewhere making their way through south-eastern Europe (ITV News, 2016).

According to Farage – who, it should be pointed out, does not see himself as "far-right" (Cowley, 2024) – his brand of radical right politics has been a bulwark against extremism. He eschews explicit biological racism, for instance, which is in keeping with wider public attitudes in the UK: an opinion poll carried out in 2020, for instance, found that 93% of people disagreed with the statement "to be truly British you have to be White" (Ipsos, 2020). Indeed, Britain's radical right itself has a certain degree of ethnic diversity. Nonetheless, radical right politics in the UK prioritises rhetorical attacks on certain categories of immigrants – chiefly, asylum-seekers (Findlay, 2025) – and the stoking of anxieties around cultural difference (Adu, 2024).

Nor has violent extremism disappeared from Britain; indeed, during the referendum campaign a white supremacist shot dead the Labour MP Jo Cox, a supporter of remaining in the EU (Cobain & Taylor, 2016). This was followed a few years later by another plot to murder a Labour MP – foiled this time – by members of a neo-Nazi youth network called 'National Action' (Collins & Mullen, 2019). While the extreme right, unlike the radical right, remains organisationally small and fragmented, its ideas have found a new lease of life online. Violent and misogynist online subcultures have been blamed for a series of other murders in the UK in recent years (Adams, 2025, Carr, 2023), while entrepreneurial individuals have built up large social media followings by posting and amplifying far-right themes, conspiracy theories and disinformation.

The far-right influencer Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, who uses the pseudonym Tommy Robinson, illustrates the shift that has taken place (Trilling, 2018). He

emerged in 2009 as the leader of the English Defence League (EDL), an anti-Muslim street movement organised via football hooligan networks. Since leaving the EDL in 2013, Yaxley-Lennon has had far greater reach as an unaffiliated social media personality, encouraging donations from his supporters and making common cause with other similar grifters. In July 2024, in fact, only a few days before the murders in Southport, Yaxley-Lennon held a rally in central London attended by twenty to thirty thousand people, with up to half a million watching online (Mulhall, 2024). The event drew together a range of conspiratorial themes, with a series of far-right personalities giving speeches attacking immigration, asylum-seekers, trans rights, Net Zero, 'Big Pharma' and vaccines.

At the same time, the centre right has been pulled in the far right's direction. The Conservatives, led by Boris Johnson, won the 2019 general election and broke a political impasse over Brexit by co-opting far-right populist themes. At each inflection point between 2019 and their losing power in 2024, the Conservatives and their media cheerleaders chose to double down on the populist rhetoric, painting their opponents as 'enemies' who threatened the integrity of the nation. The Black Lives Matter protests in 2020 were treated by Conservative MPs as signs of an 'alien' culture that had taken over Britain's cities (Trilling, 2020), while the government introduced prison sentences of up to ten years for defacing a public memorial (Sentencing Council, 2025). When asylum-seekers started using small inflatable boats to cross the Channel – as opposed to stowing away in lorries, as they had largely done previously (Walsh & Cuibus, 2024) – during the Covid lockdown of 2020, the government leant into the moral panic being whipped up by Farage and some right-wing media outlets (Home Office, 2020). The Conservatives (under Johnson and his successors Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak) then spent four years trying and failing to enact a draconian policy that sought to permanently deport refugees who crossed the Channel to Rwanda (Trilling, 2024).

Such moves were accompanied by inflammatory rhetoric. In autumn 2020, after Johnson and his then-Home Secretary Priti Patel mounted a series of rhetorical attacks on "lefty" immigration lawyers (Mason, 2023), a Nazi sympathiser tried to kill the head of immigration law at a prominent firm of solicitors (Casciani, 2024). The Home Secretary from late 2022 onwards, Suella Braverman – who was once admonished by the Board of Deputies of British Jews for using the conspiracy theory-derived term "cultural Marxism" in a speech (Walker, 2019) – was sacked in November 2023 after accusing the police of being too lenient on pro-Palestine protesters, who she smeared as doing "hate marches" (Sky News, 2023). Her comments were widely blamed for subsequent violence, in which far-right counter-protesters attacked the police. The Conservatives' reward for their populist turn was that they destroyed their electoral base, suffering a crushing defeat in the general election of July 2024. They are now in danger of being overtaken by Reform UK (Politico, 2025).

The Southport riots, which took place only a few weeks after that election, were a product of all the different strands in British politics described above, which happened to come together at an opportune moment. In the hours after the Southport murders, an information vacuum about the perpetrator – because of prosecutors' guidelines that advise against releasing information on a suspect before their trial – allowed false rumours to circulate online (Casciani & Holt, 2025). Yaxley-Lennon and the misogynist influencer Andrew Tate were among the prominent social media users who spread misinformation during this period (Cheshire & Doak, 2024), while Farage posted a video asking whether the "truth [about the murders] is being withheld from us" (Dodd et al., 2024). Misinformation was also shared for non-political reasons: one widely-shared post gave the perpetrator a false, islamic-sounding name. Despite initial suggestions this could have been Russian state propaganda intended to inflame tensions, the source was eventually traced to a Pakistan-based click-farming website (Spring, 2024).

As these rumours spread, a veteran neo-Nazi activist from Merseyside called for a protest in Southport, promoting it via a Telegram group that swiftly attracted thousands of followers (Hope not Hate, 2025). Similar online calls for protests elsewhere cropped up, but most did not originate from people with formal political affiliations, according to the British anti-fascist campaign group 'Hope not Hate' (2025) – and neither were most of the rioters. The disturbances largely took place in deprived areas, as riots tend to do, but the resentment on which they rested went further. "Are the left elite to blame for the violence in Southport as they continue to smear and ignore angry communities?" the right-wing television channel GB News – partly owned by Paul Marshall, a multi-millionaire who has acquired a string of right-wing media outlets in recent years (Geoghegan, 2025) – asked in an online poll on 1 August 2024 (Robertson, 2024).

Since the summer of 2024, the riots have received surprisingly little attention in Britain. The violence petered out after around a week, due in part to a swift law-and-order crackdown. Britain's current prime minister, the Labour leader Keir Starmer, is a former director of public prosecutions. His government instructed that prison places be freed up and trials expedited to produce a string of swift convictions (Grammaticas & Mackintosh, 2024). But it remains to be seen what the government, whose strategy for winning power was based on repudiating the socialist politics of the former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, will do about the conditions that made the riots possible. According to a recent survey by 'Hope not Hate,' (2025) 40% of British people would now prefer a "strong and decisive leader who has the authority to override or ignore parliament" over a liberal democracy with regular elections and a multi-party system. The more pessimistic people are about their own lives, found the survey, the more likely they are to support Reform UK, to believe multiculturalism is failing and to oppose immigration. These are difficult times, globally and domestically, but if the political left is unable to foster a sense

of optimism about the future, then it is likely to be the far right's turn next. Reform UK are now neck-and-neck in the polls with both Labour and the Conservatives (Politico, 2025).

At the same time, it is important to resist the temptation to believe that last year's violence has a simple economic explanation. It is no accident that much of the rioting took place in parts of the country from which political power and wealth have drained away as Britain has become a more unequal place – and where, as in many other places, vital social institutions that keep communities happy and healthy have been gutted by years of austerity economics (Duncan et al., 2025; House of Lords Library, 2023). But the riots were not a cry of pain from the most deprived. They were perpetrated by people who could only find a sense of belonging by singling out and attacking others on the basis of their ethnicity, and who indulged in the destructive fantasy that their own frustrations would diminish so long as other people could have it worse. If British society is encouraging people to behave that way, then we have to start talking about how to repair the damage. But that needs to come with a wholesale rejection of the racist lies on which the violence thrives.

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