This chapter introduces the EDL as an organisation: its origins, shape and trajectory. While ostensibly a straightforward exercise in ethnographic description, the EDL proved to be a slippery object of study. This is, first, because the movement itself is currently in a ‘state of flux’ (Eddowes, 2015) as it seeks to simultaneously stabilise and transform following its so-called ‘decapitation’ in October 2013 when its co-founders and leaders unexpectedly resigned. Second, it is because to write about the EDL is not to simply describe a contemporary social movement but to navigate a representational battlefield where one-dimensional reporting of the organisation competes with the movement’s own defensive self-presentation. The chapter is thus rather the story of the shifting constitution of the EDL as the outcome of its reflexive engagement with external representations and its internal struggle to create a structure and purpose beyond the street protests of ‘Tommy Robinson’s barmy army’.

**Founding myths: the origins of the EDL**

The EDL was founded on 27 June 2009 as a response to street protests against British troop homecoming celebrations in Luton by an offshoot of the Islamist group al-Muhajiroun, Ahlus Sunnah wal Jamaah, led by Sayful Islam (Copsey, 2010: 8). It built on long-standing tensions in the town, which has a population that is 18 per cent Muslim and a history of Islamist recruitment and activism (2010: 8), and drew on links not with traditional far right parties but a number of ultra-patriotic ‘anti-Jihadist’ organisations evolving from within the football casual subculture (2010: 9). Thus, the EDL was originally a single-issue movement, protesting against ‘extremist Islam’ and disrespect for British troops. At its outset its aim was to force the government to get Islamic extremists ‘off the streets’ (2010: 11).

This single-issue focus – and absence, for example, of a more general anti-immigration stance – has been a persistent source of criticism from more traditional far right groups and individuals on the periphery of the EDL. For mainstream EDL supporters, however, it remains an important founding myth that the EDL ‘started up in response, as a protest group, to basically demonstrate … to the
government against things like this attacking of the troops happening’ (Tim). Many also recognise the importance, especially at the start of the movement, of the links with football firms – ‘when it first started … it was all football fans’ (Matt). Indeed, Matt was organiser of a city division of the EDL that had been originally constituted not in the name of the city but of one of its football teams and continued to hold its ‘HQ’ and divisional meetings in a pub close to its ground.

The EDL presents its objectives in its mission statement,\(^4\) which conceives of the movement, first and foremost, as raising awareness of the perceived threat of Islam to British culture and society. That statement sets out the EDL’s mission as one to promote: human rights against ‘religiously-inspired intolerance and barbarity that are thriving amongst certain sections of the Muslim population in Britain’ (specifically the denigration and oppression of women, the molestation of young children, ‘honour killings’, homophobia, anti-Semitism and support for those committing terrorist atrocities); democracy and the rule of law (by opposing Sharia law, especially its implementation and the operation of ‘Islamic courts’\(^5\) in the UK, and the extension of the sale of halal meat without non-halal alternatives); public debate on Islam that is balanced and not ‘sanitised’ by politicians or that labels any discussion of the link between Islamic teachings and the activities of Islamic radicals and criminals as racist, xenophobic or Islamophobic;\(^6\) the respect of the traditions and culture of England both within public educational institutions (which are seen as prioritising minority cultures) and by those who migrate to the country; and an international outlook that allows the movement to work in solidarity with others around the world.

This official ‘awareness raising’ objective was referred to spontaneously by respondents and is ostensibly embedded in the primary form of activism of the movement – street demonstrations – which are held always ‘for a reason’ (Kane). When the local community see and hear the demonstrators, Chas believes, ‘they’ll click in their head “so this is happening in our local community”’. However, in practice, there was little discussion or knowledge of the particular issue about which awareness was being raised in advance of national demos to which respondents travelled; information about the purpose of the demonstration was often shared only on the coach. Observation at divisional meetings suggested that the location of national demonstrations was determined as much by Regional Organisers’ desire to profile the region as the ‘reason’ for holding it there (field diary, 4 April 2013). Discussion of potential foci for demonstrations, however, also revealed organisers sought to avoid purely opportunistic demonstrations; for this reason two local tragedies (a murder and a suicide) were ruled out as legitimate reasons for protest (field diary, 4 April 2013).

Another key foundation myth was that the EDL was not a traditional far right party. Differentiation of the EDL from other movements on the far right of the political spectrum, especially the BNP (which the EDL leadership and many grassroots members denounce as ‘racist’ in its policies and membership rules) is central to definitions of ‘self’ for EDL members (see Chapter 4). The defensive nature of this narrative is explained not least by the fact that both Tommy Robinson and Kevin Carroll had been members of the BNP formerly. When these
connections are pointed out, respondents explain that ‘Tommy Robinson said himself, the reason he joined the BNP is because … he was that desperate. There was nothing else you could turn to’ (Tina). While these links are far from confined to the former leadership, nor are they universal. Of the thirty-nine respondents in this study, only two had been members of the BNP and one had ‘been to a couple of talks’ held by the party although not joined. Ed, a Regional Organiser (RO) of the EDL at the time of fieldwork, had been a BNP organiser and member of the security team (from 2005) and had stood for election in the local council elections in his area three times. When the EDL became a ‘proscribed organisation’ in the BNP in September 2009, Ed was given an ultimatum to ‘choose’ between his BNP and EDL affiliation and ‘chose the EDL’.

The development and trajectory of the EDL: turning points

The EDL has no formal membership making it difficult to estimate its level of support. The current number of 'likes' on the national Facebook site stands at 181,000; while this is a fraction of the 816,000 Britain First boasts, former EDL Chair, Steve Eddowes, emphasises that, unlike for Britain First, support for the EDL ‘ain’t bought’ (Eddowes, 2015). The number of active members is estimated to be ‘at least’ 25,000 to 30,000 according to a Demos survey of its Facebook users (Bartlett and Littler, 2011: 5). If we take attendance at demonstrations as a measure of activism – using Copsey's (2010: 27–29) data on the thirty EDL (co-)organised demonstrations between July 2009 and October 2010 – then the trajectory of the movement shows a rise in attendance to a peak of around 2,000 (January–April 2010) followed by a decline to around 800 to 1,000 during the second half of that year. This pattern is confirmed by this study; demonstrations such as that in Stoke-on-Trent (January 2010) are remembered with particular nostalgia (Chas, Tim) while the decline noted towards the end of 2010 continued. When fieldwork for this study began (April 2012) numbers at national demonstrations were routinely in the hundreds (between 300 and 700 people) rather than thousands. Thus a climate of despondency characterised the first year of the research as numbers of people attending demonstrations were ‘dying’ (Tim) and the movement itself appeared to be in a serious crisis of leadership, strategy and recruitment. This was partially a result of the absence of Tommy Robinson who was arrested in October 2012 (released at end of February 2013) for the use of false identity documentation during a trip to the United States (Gover, 2012), which provided the space for in-fighting, leadership challenges and a general uncertainty about the future of the movement.

May 2013 marked the first of two turning points in the movement’s trajectory when the external environment was significantly altered by the murder of soldier Lee Rigby (22 May 2013) in Woolwich, London. The media reported a number of flash demonstrations by the EDL immediately after the killing and accused the movement of ‘exploiting’ it for its own Islamophobic aims as well as being responsible for a series of attacks on mosques and Islamic cultural centres. While this raised the profile of the movement in a negative way, the ferocity
of the murder and the perpetrators’ own declaration that it constituted legitimate revenge for the death of innocent Muslims resulting from British military action abroad, aroused popular interest in the movement. Local divisions of the EDL reported numbers registering through their webpage as tripling within 48 hours of the murder. The first national demonstration after Lee Rigby’s murder (Newcastle, 25 May 2013) saw the movement able to mobilise at least as many demonstrators as at its former peak. Indeed, Ed, who had been attending EDL demonstrations since the start of the movement, claimed it was ‘bigger than any demo I’ve been on’ and estimated the number of demonstrators at 7,000. Perhaps more significantly, the events of May 2013 triggered a resetting of the movement’s frame to emphasise, as it had done at its inception, a primary concern with the denigration of British Armed Forces. As Tommy Robinson said in his speech at the Newcastle demonstration – over the four years of its existence, the movement had ‘swayed from our course’ but these events had ‘brought it back together’ (field diary, 25 May 2013). If, prior to the murder of Lee Rigby, the EDL was far from being a household name, the situation after May 2013 was very different.

It was internal shock waves that caused the second turning point. On 7 October 2013, just four and a half months after the Lee Rigby murder and when the movement seemed to have been given a new lease of life, Tommy Robinson and Kevin Carroll resigned. The resignations were given particular dramatic effect because they were announced at a press conference organised by new ‘partners’, the Quilliam Foundation. Moreover, even to ROs in the movement, the news ‘came as a bit of a shock’ (Ed). While the links with Quilliam were known about, the talks the leadership were in had been thought to be about ‘bouncing ideas off each other rather than actually sitting at the same table’ (Ed).

At grassroots level, response to the news was raw and mixed. On the day of the resignation I was in Crown Court attending the trial of one of the respondents (Jack) accused of ‘violent disorder’ at an EDL demonstration more than a year previously. The irony of the situation was not lost on either the respondent or the court officials. Between proceedings the prosecution and the defence counsel joked with each other that, mirroring Tommy Robinson’s move, Jack’s defence counsel, who was Muslim, would be ‘the next leader of the EDL’ (field diary, 8 October 2013). The resignations impacted negatively on morale and numbers at demonstrations declined once more. At the national demonstration in Bradford on the following weekend, members expressed mixed emotions. One, very drunk, demonstrator pronounced that the former leadership had been ‘bought off’ and at one point the familiar chant of ‘Tommy Robinson’s barmy army’ (see Chapter 7) rang out as ‘Tommy Robinson’s Muslim army’ (field diary 12 October 2013). Alongside the anger there was widespread recognition of the pressures the leadership had been under (from past and pending prosecutions, threats and intimidation and financial difficulties). Indeed, it was not so much the decision to resign that shocked people but the suddenness and manner in which it happened. Tina encapsulates the emotions this evoked in interview a few days later: ‘when it first come out … I just thought, “You absolute traitor” … especially when I seen him
on the Sky news, sitting in between two ex-jihadists, calling us extremists. I just thought this guy’s been had by the balls’ (Tina).

The facilitation of the resignation by Quilliam jarred. People were also angry that at both this initial press conference and in subsequent interviews (on BBC’s Newsnight for example), Tommy Robinson suggested that the reason he had resigned was that the movement remained home to ‘extremist’ elements. He cited specifically his horror at seeing White Pride flags flown at the Manchester demonstration, which he had attended while on tag. Respondents reported that on a BBC Look East programme he had also claimed the EDL would be ‘dead before Christmas’ without his support, and this provoked determination to defy the prediction (field diary, 12 October 2013).

The accusations of treachery were fuelled by rumours that the leadership had passed on the details of EDL members to Quilliam and the police (field diary, 12 October 2013) and initially were echoed by a number of ROs. However, following a meeting of ROs at which a new collective leadership was agreed, the line was taken that ‘We still a hundred per cent back … Tommy and Kev’ because they are not working ‘for’ but ‘alongside’ Quilliam (Ed). Ed, who had talked personally to the former leaders about their decision, goes on to suggest that those who were quick to point the finger should ‘look at the bigger picture’ since the resignation had generated significant publicity: ‘He’s been on more TV shows in the last fucking three weeks than he has been in four years. … They turned him down in the past and now they want him on’ (Ed).

At a meeting of ROs shortly after the resignations, it was agreed that the EDL should henceforth be run by a committee of the nineteen ROs with a rotating chair. This committee remained loyal to the former leadership, taking the line that the former leadership was simply ‘going in a different direction’ to ‘get a bigger stage’ (Ed). The decision to run the movement through a ‘Management Committee’ was partially designed to relieve the pressure on a single leader, allowing the Chair to ‘step back’ when they began to feel the pressure from the ‘hounding’ any leader of the EDL would be subject to (Ed). The initially appointed Chair, Tim Ablitt, was replaced on 8 February 2014 by Steve Eddowes, previously RO for West Midlands and Head of Security. Eddowes himself stepped down as Chair and RO in autumn 2015 due to competing commitments. He returned to running security for Tommy Robinson, who launched the (official) Pegida UK movement in December 2015, although is not affiliated with the new movement (Eddowes, 2016). Ian Crossland was elected leader of the EDL in December 2015 and Alan Spence became Chair of its Management Committee.

The humiliation of the resignation and realignment of Tommy Robinson and Kevin Carroll left the movement vulnerable. By January 2014, the initial spike in numbers following the murder of Lee Rigby had gone ‘flat’. The potential to scoop a ready-made street army was not lost on emergent parties of the far right who, according to Eddowes (2015), saw the opportunity to snap up ‘brand EDL’. The most obvious attempt to court EDL activists was by Britain First, founded in May 2011 by a number of former BNP activists (including Jim Dowson and, current leader, Paul Golding). A video released in November 2014 by the party
directly compares the record of the EDL and Britain First and criticises the EDL for lack of direct action, for cooperating with the police over planned demonstrations, not recognising that real change could only come about through being part of the political process and for wasting time idolising their old leader who had betrayed them. The hostility between Britain First and the EDL is mutual. Ed, who had known its founders personally from his own previous BNP activism, called them ‘horrible people’ holding racist views while Eddowes (2015) dismisses the party as ‘all spin … all marketing’. At the same time, old alliances such as that with Paul Weston, leader of Liberty GB and former leader of the British Freedom Party, remained in place. Paul Weston subsequently became official leader of Pegida UK. The earlier strategy of extending international links with the broader ‘counter-Jihad’ movement including the Pax Europe Citizens Movement, Stop Islamisation of Europe, and its American affiliate, and the formation and links with Defence Leagues in a number of north European and Nordic countries (Copsey, 2010: 24) has also suffered from the wider instability. While there remains a commitment to international collaboration, such links are on the back-burner until ‘we’ve got our own house in order’ (Eddowes, 2015).

‘Every single one of you is a leader’: organisation and structure

Existing literature on radical, right wing and populist parties suggests that they ‘usually have a hierarchical structure with (male) leaders who exploit modern trends of the political profession to perfection’ (Wodak, 2013: 28). This is rooted in a wider understanding of extremist groups as rigidly and hierarchically structured with a clearly delineated chain of authority and limited tolerance of internal dissent and criticism (Hogg, 2012: 25). However, the evidence for this argument in relation to radical right parties and movements is based on a relatively insubstantial body of work due to their empirical inaccessibility (Kitschelt, 2007: 1195). For this reason, the discussion below focuses on the insight that ethnographic data and interview material lend to understanding how the movement is experienced organisationally by its grassroots members following a brief outline of the formal structure of the organisation.

‘No one is bigger or better than anyone else’: structure, function and hierarchy

Even formally, the EDL is characterised by a relatively flat structure. Until the resignation of Tommy Robinson and Kevin Carroll in October 2013, the structure consisted of Robinson and Carroll as co-leaders (often described as ‘spokesmen’ by activists) supported by ROs heading up nineteen geographically delimited regional organisations. The regional organisations preside over myriad local ‘divisions’, which are the basic unit of grassroots activism. These divisions are territorially structured although very fluid in terms of their activeness; ‘divisions’ may cover whole cities or counties in some cases while in others there may be more...
than one division for a single postcode area (field diary, 3, 7 September 2013). This unevenness stems from the rapid turnover in members, especially ‘admins’ (those who run the Facebook pages for the division and organise fundraising events and travel to demonstrations) as well as being the product of personal disputes between admins (leading to the proliferation of divisions to appease ‘egos’). Division names are often displayed on the back of EDL hoodies, along with other customised slogans (see Figure 7.4). There are also a number of ‘divisions’ that cut across the territorially rooted structural organisation of the movement. While these divisions vary in size, stability and degree of ‘real’ as opposed to virtual existence, over the life course of the EDL they have included dedicated divisions for supporters who are Sikhs, Hindus, Jews and Greeks/Cypriots. The movement also has long-standing women’s (‘Angels’), LGBT and Armed Forces divisions. Some divisions have dedicated ‘youth divisions’ attached to them, although there is no youth division coordinated at national level. In this study a number of respondents had established and run a ‘youth division’ attached to their town division and saw it as important in ensuring their voices were heard:

… because it’s good like to let the youths get to voice their opinion. Cause really if you’re part of like say our [names home town] youth we can do our own thing like with the public and that. We don’t have to run it through the olders. We can just like get the lads together and like say ‘Lads we are leafleting’. We are doing it as youth, do you know what I mean? (Connor)

However, some older members resisted the need for youth divisions, suggesting that younger members were ‘hard work’, jumpy and defensive. Intergenerational tensions – around the form and pace of activism (Brown and Pickerill, 2009: 30) – emerged from time to time. A dispute had developed between the leader of a local youth division and a Divisional Organiser over control of the youth division web page (Connor) and the same youth division had been the subject of disciplining by older division leaders following their ‘loud’ and aggressive behaviour travelling to a demonstration (see Chapter 8).

Divisional meetings are infrequent and generally poorly attended. Those at which I was present had between twelve and twenty-five people in attendance, although there were larger ‘meet and greet’ events too. Meetings were unstructured and supported by neither a formal agenda nor minutes. Although, in principle, ‘any good idea will be listened to’ and participants are asked if there are any ‘questions’ at the end, meetings are mainly an opportunity for Divisional Organisers to inform people of decisions and there is no apparent procedure for raising agenda items or motions, making points or reaching decisions (field diary, 31 August 2012). Issues discussed at various meetings included: the planning of future demonstrations; potential flash demos; the organisation of travel to demonstrations (finding coach companies prepared to transport the EDL was a perennial logistical problem); merchandising; recruitment; and matters of discipline. Guest speakers were invited sometimes; on the occasions I witnessed this, one was a spokesman for the Sikh Awareness Society, the other a member of the Sikh division of the EDL and in both cases they talked about their concerns about
Islamism from the perspective of the Sikh community. Only once was a vote taken. This concerned whether a member accused of having acted violently at a demonstration should be allowed to stay in the movement. That voting took place rarely was evident from both how this vote was conducted and the fact that the results continued to be disputed afterwards as individuals complained that some people who did not even know the person in question had voted. Meetings were held in what was referred to always as ‘HQ’ (in order to protect the pub landlords), often coincided with other ‘social events’ and were always preceded and followed by liberal alcohol consumption.

Functions and hierarchies are unclear. One local division leader laughed that ‘ROs they don’t do nothing’ and at early divisional meetings, it was indeed the two division leaders who took the stage while ROs for the wider region (if present at all) remained in the background, commenting only where necessary. From April 2013, however, one of the ROs for the region took a much greater directional role and started to chair the meetings. This is not unusual – visibility and positioning as well as ‘stepping back’ occur frequently, especially when individuals need to adopt a low profile either because of legal investigations or for personal reasons. However, moments of crisis exposed the ‘loose and chaotic structure’ (Copsey, 2010: 6) of the movement. When it was decided that a committee of the ROs would lead the movement, following the resignation of Robinson and Carroll, for example, it transpired that there was not one but four ROs for the region as individual town or city ‘divisions’ had named ROs (field diary, 12 October 2013).

This proliferation is a product of the informality and lack of strict hierarchical structure of the movement. Many of those in division leader or ‘admin’ positions narrate this as a passive process: ‘somebody gave me the [names city] division I just run it since then like’ (Matt). Theresa described how ‘I’ve been left to run [the division]’ after the previous admin had had some personal problems. An exception to this rule was recounted by Euan. To avoid the practice of what he called ‘self-appointment’, when his division leader had died, a voting procedure had been instigated to choose his successor and the three people with the highest number of votes decided to work together as a ‘committee’ to run the division (Euan). Moreover, the positive side of this informality is that, alongside a good deal of banter and irreverent complaining about local division and regional leaders, there is a genuine sense that the role of leaders is to facilitate and initiate rather than ‘lead’.

I aye12 a leader, do you know what I mean? Everyone’s in there. If I wanna do something, like today, I asked everyone for their opinions on doing it. … I day just go yeah we are doing it, you aye got a choice. … We’re all in it together. That’s the way I see it. (Connor)

Matt also sees everyone as equal in the movement regardless of how long they had been in it: ‘a new person could join tomorrow and like he’s the same as me. … [N]o one is bigger or better than anyone else, apart from Tommy and Kevin’ (Matt). This raises the question of leadership at the national level; are some, in fact, more equal than others?
Leading the ‘barmy army’: mediating opinions and talking sense

Until October 2013, the EDL was co-led by Tommy Robinson and Kevin Carroll (themselves cousins). Most members saw the two men as playing equal but complementary roles in the movement; Tommy Robinson’s ‘passion’ and ‘drive’ (Eddowes, 2015) made him a motivating street leader while Kevin Carroll sought to steer the movement towards a more political route by pursuing an alliance with the British Freedom Party and standing in the 2012 Police and Crime Commissioner elections (Kelly, 2012). The movement was not ‘leaderless’ (Castells, 2012: 170), therefore, but there is equally little evidence of the ‘cult of leadership’ normally ascribed to far right political parties (Ignazi, 2003: 106). At demonstrations, people applauded and often posed for pictures with the co-leaders and sometimes a chant of ‘Tommy Robinson’s barmy army’ could be heard (field diary, 29 September 2012). Speeches were passionate but not rabble-rousing and an effort was made to include local speakers, women speakers13 and, increasingly, young speakers rather than focusing on a single, charismatic leader. Some respondents articulated an emotional attachment to Tommy Robinson – ‘I will march into hell for Tommy’ (Declan). However, most talked rationally about their ‘respect’ for him, in particular for the fact that he ‘knows his stuff’ and that he had carried on despite the pressures on him and his family that accompany the leadership role. At the same time, neither leader was beyond criticism. There was scepticism about some of the stories of hardship and persecution endured by the leaders (Ian, Tim) and one respondent felt Tommy was ‘way over his head’ with his ambitions to move into politics (Michelle). Thus, when the movement was effectively functioning without either of its leaders in late 2012 (while Tommy Robinson was in prison and Kevin Carroll on bail conditions that did not allow him contact with other EDL members), Local Organisers remained unconcerned since, for them, the EDL was never a top-down organisation anyway (field diary, 18 November 2012).

Particularly valued in the leadership is the quality of ‘telling it as it is’. Jason believes that both Tommy Robinson and Kevin Carroll ‘speak their minds’ and ‘tell the truth’ while Tommy Robinson ‘always speaks sense’ (Kane). This, according to Chas, is because he is ‘one of us’:

… the thing which I always liked about him was that he was just one of us. He would talk to you like he was one of us. He wouldn’t look down on you. He wouldn’t say like ‘you don’t know this, you don’t know that’. … I always liked Tommy for that. He was a typical bloke off a council estate which most of EDL began as. (Chas)

The point of contrast here is of course mainstream politicians who are characterised as privileged and detached: ‘They’ve not lived in the real world’ (Lisa). The lack of ‘real-life experience’ of politicians seriously undermines their capacity to govern: ‘David Cameron, for instance, right? Why would a person like me
wanna let him tell me what’s best for me when he’s never lived my life?’ (Tina). Thus, what politics needs, according to Chas, is precisely a Tommy Robinson figure: ‘It needs … not someone’s who’s been like at Eton school who’s had like everything done for ’em who’s had all this. It needs somebody who’s actually grown up on the streets.’ Comparing Tommy Robinson (at the time of interview serving a prison sentence) to Nelson Mandela, Lisa says he is the kind of leader who is persecuted for ‘speaking up for the people’ (Lisa). In contrast, mainstream politicians are not out to do things for ‘the people’ but ‘just there to fill their own back pockets’ (Michelle). Encapsulating what Hay (2007: 39) cites as one of the three key sources of voter distrust of politics – the (perceived) tendency of political elites to subvert the collective public interest in the narrow pursuit of party or self-interest whilst proclaiming themselves disingenuously to be guardians of the former – Tina declares that the problem with the main political parties is that ‘they act like they’re, they’re so good to the public, and everything’s for the people when nothing is’.

That the movement is not dependent on a single charismatic or strong leader appears to have been confirmed in the restructuring of the movement following the unexpected resignations of Tommy Robinson and Kevin Carroll. The candidature of a potential replacement ‘leader’, Tony Curtis, was rejected in favour of a committee of ROs, because Curtis saw himself as ‘some self-proclaimed messiah’ (Ed).

The move to a committee structure incurred some grassroots criticism of the undemocratic nature of the transfer of power. When Ivan Humble announced at the Bradford demonstration (October 2013) that the ROs would take things forward and that ordinary members should make their voices heard by talking to their ROs, an EDL demonstrator was heard to grumble ‘but nobody elected them, they were appointed by Tommy. It’s not democratic’ (field diary, 12 October 2013). The Chair of the committee rotated from the initially appointed Tim Ablitt to Steve Eddowes (February 2014) who, from the outset, stated he was not interested in becoming the face and voice of the movement. Eddowes (2015) saw his role as one of mediating between ‘strong personalities and a lot of strong opinions’ and being prepared to take responsibility for the final decision. This led him to focus on a behind-the-scenes role, allowing others such as Paul Weston, leader of Liberty GB, and former leader of the British Freedom Party, and ‘freelancer’ Dave Russell (‘DJ Bossman’) who also had no official position within the EDL, to deliver speeches at demonstrations. Collective leadership was absorbed into the ethos and mission of the movement. Following criticism of a ‘leaderless’ EDL, Eddowes declared, in a speech at the Birmingham demonstration (11 October 2014), that what had been learned from the process of picking up the pieces of the EDL after the resignations of Robinson and Carroll was that ‘there is no way in the world this precious thing of ours could ever be allowed to be in one person’s hands again’. Calling on grassroots members to recognise that this ‘committee’ is just a name for the old ROs who had always made the movement function, he declared, ‘Leader? Yeah, I’m a leader, they’re [ROs] leaders, stewards are leaders, security are leaders. But most importantly, every single one of
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you is a leader.’ While this may appear to be populist rhetoric, the accessibility and proximity of leadership at both local and national levels, based on the evidence from this study at least, translated into a sense among grassroots activists that they could, and, if the opportunity arose, would, take a leadership position in the movement. Although from December 2015, the EDL once again had an official ‘leader’ – Ian Crossland – grassroots activists participated in his election through social media and the Management Committee remains in place with a new Chair.

Stepping out of line: hierarchy and discipline

In theory the EDL is governed by a ‘code of conduct’ stipulating that all members must adhere to the correct chain of command (division leader, RO, national leadership) (Copsey, 2010: 19). Long-standing activists recognised that the movement had become more structured than in the early days when ‘It was just like ringing up twenty lads, and twenty lads turn up in the boozer, jump on the coach’ (Ed). However, while there was a formal chain of command, it was not one that people necessarily observed. Ed noted that he himself had flouted the official code of conduct by not taking my request to interview him further up the chain of command, opting to informally consult a fellow RO instead.

Indeed, there appear to be more grey areas than clear lines to cross in the EDL chain of command. One member had been pulled into line when he had suggested – because of his profile in one of the cross-cutting divisions – that after the leadership resignations he felt that he did not know whom he should answer to; Ed told him straight that if he is ‘in [names region] division’ he answers to their ROs (field diary, 31 October 2013). When Rachel was told to leave the movement when she challenged the right of a new division leader to order her about, other division leaders and the RO backed her, as a long-standing local division admin, over the highly active but new division leader (field diary, 22 November 2014). The next day the new division leader posted a statement that he had decided to step down from leadership of the division.

Just who had the authority to ‘kick out’ someone from the movement is unclear. Early in the research, the case for and against ‘kicking out’ one member of the local division had been discussed at a divisional meeting (see above). However, later cases of individuals who were local admins and, in one case, an RO who apparently had been ‘kicked out’ had not been discussed by the division (field diary, 10 May 2014). This internal ‘infighting’ or ‘factioning’ is perceived by members as one of the main constraints on the efficacy and future of the movement (see below) and the lack of transparency in hierarchy and authority exacerbates the tension.

Disciplining through exclusion is discussed most frequently in relation to the non-tolerance of neo-Nazi elements; a policy promoted by the leadership, demonstratively pursued at public events and spontaneously enacted at grassroots level (see Chapter 4). Flushing out ‘closet neo-Nazis’ requires extensive networks of people with their ear close to the ground and their eyes open.
since the contemporary ‘dark network’ is much harder to identify than the old enemies such as Combat 18 (Eddowes, 2015). Those who ‘cause trouble’, by getting drunk and starting fights especially at demonstrations, are also disciplined. People were thrown out of the organisation, according to one respondent, primarily not for ideological reasons but ‘because they’re absolute idiots’ (Tim). Others argue that there is already too much discipline and say they would prefer ‘a more laid back approach’ (Chas). Since younger EDL members like Chas are perceived as unruly, prone to ‘kick off’ at demonstrations or to use inappropriate language in posts to social media sites, they are also often the object of disciplining or exclusion. A particular incident in which members of a local youth division were perceived to have acted out of line while travelling to an EDL demo (see Chapter 8) resulted in them being given an official warning by a Divisional Organiser that ‘if they can’t toe the line then we don’t want to stand with them’ (Matt). Whom the movement should ‘stand with’ and whom it should exclude is discussed further below.

Who finances the EDL?

There has been considerable speculation and dispute over the origins of funding of the EDL. Copsey (2010: 15) suggests that Alan Lake, a millionaire IT consultant from north London and founder of the website 4freedoms.com, has provided generous financial support to the movement. This is a persistent allegation by the BNP and UAF. In September 2009, Lake came forward as a key figure working behind the scenes for the EDL, although rumours that he bankrolled the EDL to the tune of millions of pounds remain unsubstantiated (2010: 15). Eddowes (2015) admits that, at the start, ‘there were people who were putting funds in’ but notes that any such funding is ‘long gone’. At grassroots level, the few comments on financial issues encountered, rejected the idea of an external funder, comparing what they perceived as the ‘working class’ basis of the EDL to the privileged position of opposition groups who, it is claimed, are government-funded:

They’ve got big offices and they employ people to work there, so how can the UAF afford that? They have got to get some funding. They said the EDL are funded by BNP and Pamela Geller. We get nothing. Every march, every bit of merchandise is out of our own pockets. I mean it’s so hard. … Because we are a working-class movement. I mean everybody who you see on an EDL march is working, unemployed, students. (Declan)

Evidence from grassroots level is that although Lake’s anti-Islam discourse has a number of common tropes with those found in EDL statements and narratives, as a figure he has no visibility. Few members in this study had heard of Lake or his website although since I was approached and given a card with the website address on it at the EDL demonstration in Bristol, it might be presumed that respondents had also encountered those promoting the site (field diary, 14 July 2012). After a failed attempt to persuade the EDL to align itself politically with
UKIP in May 2010, Copsey suggests, Lake ceased putting himself forward as an EDL spokesperson (2010: 18).

Following the resignation of Kevin Carroll and Tommy Robinson, the new governing Committee of ROs responded to rumours about what previous leaders might have gained from the organisation financially by creating a limited company and keeping proper accounts of all donations and other income (Eddowes, 2015). However, in contrast to movements such as Britain First, the EDL continues to have no income from membership subscriptions and remains donation-light. In reality, Eddowes (2015) claims, those in senior positions put money in – to maintain websites and pay for security – rather than take it out of the movement.

Since there are no membership fees or obligatory donations, at local divisional level, the only funds in evidence are those generated locally through the sale of merchandise, collections for coach trips and from fund-raising activities such as barbecues. Local divisions in this study were described as having from ‘nothing’ in their kitty currently to, the most well-fleeced one, having ‘three-and-a-half grand’ (Ed). Another local Division Organiser confirms ‘there’s no finances basically. No financial backing, no nothing’ (Euan). If money does accrue in the division pot (if for example the coach is filled completely rather than just to the number that covers the outlay), then it is put back into the division and used, for example, to help those who get arrested or who cannot pay for a coach ticket because of difficult financial situations. This ‘looking after your own’ though applies only if the arrest is considered to be unwarranted; if a member is judged to have brought it on themselves, they are not helped.

‘No surrender’: looking to the future

In 2010 Copsey (2010: 5) concluded that ‘the future trajectory of the EDL is uncertain’. While, on the one hand, he argues, the ‘threat’ posed by the EDL ‘to our country, our values and our communities, should not be taken lightly’, on the other, its loose and chaotic structure may mean it will quickly ‘run out of steam’ (2010: 6). Despite the five years that have elapsed since that conclusion, the future of the movement remains uncertain. Public opinion data suggest that the EDL continues to be a marginal group in terms of its visibility and popular appeal. A poll conducted by Extremis/YouGov in October 2012 showed that only a third of respondents in the survey (n=548) had heard of the movement and knew what it stood for and of those who had heard of it, only 11 per cent would consider joining. This leads the authors to conclude that ‘similar to the reaction of the British public to other far right groups, we find that a clear and overwhelming majority consider the EDL to be a political pariah’.

Nonetheless, the movement persists and has withstood a series of major challenges and, in this final section, an attempt is made to explain its tenacity. It explores, first, the ongoing struggle with the media in which EDL activists perceive themselves to be locked and how new and social media may provide a means of partially compensating negative or absent mainstream media exposure. It goes on to discuss the extent to which participants in the movement feel they can effect.
change and the challenges and obstacles to efficacy. Concluding that there is little evidence of hope that they can shape the future, it is suggested that the EDL is fuelled rather by a sense of collective duty to have ‘at least tried’ and by a ‘no surrender’ ethos.

**‘The only attention is bad attention’: navigating the media**

The media are viewed first and foremost as a site of ‘misrepresentation’; of all statements by respondents about the media a third accused the press, and especially the BBC, of misrepresenting the EDL. The most common complaint is that the media are selective about what they report, resulting in ‘the only attention we get is bad attention’ (Rachel). Positive actions (e.g. charity work) of the EDL, it is claimed, are not publicised while the EDL is blamed in the press for the actions of others. This selectivity is felt to be evident in the way the media fail to show the diversity of the movement (never featuring ethnic-minority or gay members for example) and for ‘interviewing those who are drunk just so they can keep their little manifesto of EDL drunken thugs’ (Declan).

RAY: The press thingy like. They pick out the worst ones …
CHRIS: They look for someone who’s not all there, a bit slow in the head, or someone who’s drunk. They find someone who’s drunk and start asking questions.
RAY: Then they’re going to give ’em stupid answers.

This representation of EDL supporters as ‘chavvy, uneducated, yobbos’ (Tina) is translated into wider public perceptions – not least through popular culture in the form of comedy sketches or spoofs of EDL actions and supporters by comedian Russell Howard and in Heydon Prowse and Jolyon Rubinstein’s BBC 3 satirical comedy show *The Revolution Will Be Televised*. A classic illustration of the cycle of production, reproduction and reworking of such representations is the infamous ‘Muslamic ray guns’ video. This image is encountered directly by respondents at demonstrations where placards held by counter-demonstrators include those declaring, ‘If you can read this, you shouldn’t be in the EDL’ (field diary, 14 July 2012).21

By far the most common frustration, however, is that the media misrepresent the organisation as ‘Nazi’ or ‘racist’ (Tim), leading to crude equations in the public mind between ‘Nazi’ or ‘fascist’ ideology and the EDL. The media are accused of fuelling misperceptions through inaccurate reporting; a chant at the EDL national demonstration in Birmingham in July 2013 of ‘There is only one Lee Rigby’ was reported by local news subsequently as ‘There is only one Nick Griffin’ (field diary, 20 July 2013). Perceptions of the EDL as racist are also blamed on the media’s tendency to focus on demonstrative acts such as individuals sporting Nazi symbols or performing Nazi salutes at EDL marches. For some respondents such acts were the work of either UAF or National Front ‘infiltrators’ aided and
abetted in misrepresentation by the media (Declan, Mike). However, others recognise the responsibility of a minority ‘within’, which provides the opportunity for the media to tar all supporters with the same brush.

The negative image of the EDL is a cause of deep concern for many and managing the image of the movement is the second most frequently mentioned issue in relation to the media. There is little confidence, however, that there is any possibility for a movement like the EDL to counter either negative or simply absent mainstream media exposure. This encourages a certain nostalgia for ‘the old days’ when violence at demonstrations appeared to be more effective:

Yeah because the thing was when it was kicking off all the time straight away it was on all the news. It was being heard. People were seeing it on the telly. … People was listening. And then when they started, they went peaceful you know, nothing was happening, nothing kicking off it day even make page eight in the [names local town] News, do you know what I mean? You don’t even get nothing. Not a mention. Total media blackout. (Euan)

The trade-off to be made is thus between ‘spectacular’ actions, which attract media attention albeit of a negative kind, or peaceful demonstrations which are simply ignored (Juris, 2008: 84).

**Trolls and other deadly beasts: social media use**

One mechanism for circumventing negative representation in the media is to actively use the opportunities provided by new forms of media. This has been a hallmark of the EDL, which is considered one of a new generation of movements for whom new social media (specifically Facebook) is the ‘central communicative and organisational tool’ (Bartlett and Littler, 2011: 3).

In this sense, the use of the new media in the EDL is more akin to how such media have been employed in new social movements to generate and communicate within social networks (Castells, 2012) than its top-down use in traditional far right parties such as the BNP (Atton, 2006: 573; Jackson, 2011b: 73; Jackson, 2011c: 30). This is confirmed by evidence from this ethnographic study, which showed that the EDL national page is rarely used by respondents. Even official EDL pages at divisional level are used by admins as a site for posting only general information about forthcoming events; in the interests of security, details of meetings and pick-ups for demonstrations or notification of flash demonstrations are passed by phone or personal ‘inboxing’. More important are personal Facebook pages, which are used to network and to share and ‘like’ images and reports related to key campaigns, photos and videos taken during demonstrations, promos for forthcoming demos or home videos of local divisions ‘on tour’ as part of a bonding practice that sustains the EDL’s ‘one big family’ ethos (see Chapter 7).23

However, social media is also a double-edged sword. While it has allowed the movement to generate and maintain extensive grassroots networks (Jackson,
it opens the movement to ‘trolls’ and other dangerous beasts and is frequently the place where internal squabbles are played out in a destructive manner. Kane had stopped accessing Facebook, except to find out information for participating in demonstrations, because too many personal issues and ‘arguments’ were encountered there and such ‘infighting’ is cited frequently as the cause of supporters leaving or ‘stepping back’ from the movement.

Thus, while social media are central to EDL activities there is much more scepticism about Facebook than one might assume from the existing secondary literature. Individual members often change their pages or have multiple accounts in anticipation of being temporarily banned from the site; Michelle said she had had almost fifty accounts ‘disabled by Facebook’. Others, in contrast, are simply ‘not a Facebook person’ (Lisa) and use it only as a necessary evil.

Security is another source of tension over the use of Facebook, eliciting practices of ‘vouching’ for someone before accepting a friend request (Rob). EDL activists are on permanent ‘troll’ patrol and complain that Facebook is ‘where UAF get their information from’ (Declan). The ‘troll factor’ is more than paranoia. Bartlett and Littler (2011: 35) estimated that around ‘10 per cent of the EDL’s Facebook group supporters could be trolls’. Examples of ‘trolling’ recounted by respondents included the setting up of fake Facebook accounts to expose the EDL, being reported to Facebook by those objecting to the content of pages and the hacking of Facebook accounts and posting of false information. Failure to protect oneself on social media could have real consequences. Jordan had been suspended from work, and subsequently told he would be sacked if he did not voluntarily resign, following routine surveillance of employees’ Facebook profiles that revealed his EDL links. Damon was charged and bailed when ‘a joke’ post to Facebook – in which he said that he would pay £100 to anyone who would knife a leader of the UAF – was reported to the police (although subsequently charges were dropped) (field diary, 4 May 2013). Threats of violence, including death threats, are also received by EDL supporters. Indeed they are so routine, youth division activists claim, they no longer take them seriously (Connor). Another 16-year-old member noted that he had stopped using Facebook since photos of him at a recent demonstration had found their way into the media and he had received a death threat to his phone:

They put. ‘I’m gonna tie you to a chair and slaughter your mother, little sister and father, rip their throat out and leave them to bleed to death in front of you. We’re going to burn your house down with you in starting from upstairs down. You’ve got until the seventh, Brett, the clock’s ticking.’ (Brett)

Thus, while some respondents imagined ‘banter with the opposition’ (Ray) via social media to be at least some proxy for being listened to (see Chapter 8), in practice the social media can act to close down as much as open up political debate as it becomes a space for confirming rather than challenging prejudice and for disparaging rather than engaging with the opinions of others (Herring, 2001).
A losing battle? Efficacy and activism

CHRIS: We don’t want to have to go to demos to stop our country being taken over but it’s the only way we can try and do anything. We won’t succeed.
RAY: Fighting a losing battle.
CHRIS: The government are so up their fucking arses. They aren’t going to get nowhere but it isn’t going to stop you trying. …
INT: Is it worth trying?
CHRIS: Yes, as long as you’re still trying they know there are still people out there that don’t agree with them.

A concern about lack of efficacy runs through the narratives of EDL members in this study. As evident from the exchange between Ray and Chris above, demonstrations are felt to be a channel for raising the profile of the movement by making sure ‘You’ve got your word out’ (Chris). However, more respondents thought demonstrations were an ineffective rather than effective form of activism, leading even these youth division members to think about them as little more than visible evidence that ‘you’re still trying’ (Chris). Casey is similarly doubtful about ‘whether they get listened to or not’ but thinks the demonstrations are worth it because ‘they’re going to try to do something for the country … they’re trying to make a stand’. Tim reports that ‘a lot of people say “Well what difference are you gonna make?” and it’s like we might make none but at least we’ll know we’ve tried.’

Respondents did make positive suggestions about how to improve the efficacy of street demonstrations, arguing in particular that they would be more effective if they were less frequent but bigger (Connor, Matt). Lisa thinks the movement should extend its range of activities by leafleting the local area with flyers setting out the EDL’s message. She also suggests the movement engage in community outreach: ‘I’d love to do soup kitchens, you know, and helping like the young, like British youngsters, you know, yeah definitely I think it’s not all about demos is it?’ (Lisa).

For some, demonstrations did more harm than good since they revealed a lack of professionalism and seriousness; a criticism voiced primarily by those on the extremist fringe (see Chapter 4). Ollie calls EDL demonstrations ‘chaotic’ while Andrew notes that people turning up ‘with their flags the wrong way round’ and things spelled incorrectly on placards ‘makes them a laughing stock’. However, the damage done to the movement by those who attend demonstrations drunk or high is noted by mainstream EDL members as well: ‘I just look at some people and just think like yeah you’re a bit of a clown’ (Tim).

To improve efficacy, activists call for more discipline in the movement (Michelle). This is most frequently expressed as a need to ‘kick out the racists’ but there is also considerable criticism of the damage done to the movement by the continued violence at demonstrations despite efforts by organisers to ‘keep out all the trouble makers’ (Jason). Andrew’s conclusion after attending the national demonstration in Manchester and organising his own small flash demo is that ‘it needs intelligent people within these movements. I say that us four who
went out on Monday did more and created more of an impression than what those 600 or so EDL did’ (Andrew). Lisa also sees the need for greater purpose and fresh ideas:

I think you have got to have a goal. What do you want to achieve at the end of this? You can’t say ‘get rid of all Muslims’. Fucking not gonna happen and that’s not what the problem is or the issue. So yeah I would like definitely, you know, I would like, would love to be sat at the front there and coming up with ideas. (Lisa)

Divisional meetings are also criticised for being called or changed without sufficient notice (Michelle) and for being ‘not structured at all’ (Lisa).

Another perceived hindrance to the effectiveness of the movement is internal dispute. Here there is a palpable tension between the desire and need for ‘unity’ for the success of the movement and the everyday ‘in-fighting’ that disrupts the achievement of its goals and undermines commitment to the group. The EDL has a history of factioning, most notably related to the formation of more radical ‘Infidel’ groups and to manoeuvrings for power while Tommy Robinson was in prison. Referring to rumours of attempts to take over the movement at one such time, Connor complains, ‘You should not argue like in the public … You should stand together. … [L]ike the way I see it is if we don’t stand closer together now, the EDL’s gone’ (Connor).

The question organisationally is how best to handle such factioning in order to minimise the harm done to the movement; grassroots opinion on this was divided. For some, tensions were resolved by setting up either a new division of the EDL or a new movement. Respondents in this study included three who were primarily affiliated to a local ‘Infidels’ group and one who had moved from the EDL to the newly formed English Volunteer Force (EVF). This itself creates a new problem of determining which groups the EDL can ‘stand with’ and are thus welcome at EDL events and which should be excluded as it seeks to distinguish itself from the ‘far right’. Illustrative here are differing opinions on the public physical attack by Tommy Robinson on a prominent member of the National Front attending an EDL demonstration. For Rob, who at the time of interview had himself left the EDL and become Local Organiser for the EVF, this had signalled the start of the end of the EDL which should, to his mind, embrace all like-minded people. In contrast, for Chris, Tommy Robinson had acted correctly, since he was responding to the National Front member doing ‘the Hitler salute’.

Criticism of the (national and regional) leadership of the EDL was expressed only by one respondent (Michelle), although Connor notes that ‘disrespect’ shown for the leadership (as well as Tommy Robinson’s absence from demonstrations while he was in prison) had had a negative impact on the movement.

The continuation of this dilemma into the post-Robinson era of the movement is evident in press releases by the new leadership in January and September
2014. On 16 January 2014, the new committee of ROs running the EDL issued an explicit statement declaring that the Management Group did not want ‘to have unity’ with a range of named splinter groups – Britain First, South East Alliance, North West Infidels, North East Infidels, English Volunteer Force, National Front, Combat 18 and White Pride – because they ‘are openly White Pride and racist’ and/or ‘are against our Jewish and LGBT community’. In interview Eddowes (2015) defined these groups as ‘those whose strings are being pulled by far right movements’. The EDL management, the statement went on, ‘are happy to stand with any like-minded patriots who do not discriminate against creed/colour, we will not stand with groups that do discriminate and are racist’. The dilemma is that on the one hand the new leadership ‘recognises that there is a need to collaborate with like-minded organisations’ but fears that ‘People who are talking about “unity” are trying to push agendas of white pride and Nazism which we have spent five years trying to keep away.’

Narratives of factioning among respondents tend to focus on individual and personal issues rather than ideological disputes, confirming that it is not only disagreements on strategy and tactics within groups that divide but that ‘jealousies, hatreds, disappointments, and demonization foster schisms within movements’ (Klatch, 2004: 489). Connor complains ‘people are dropping out through backstabbing and egos … in-fighting is the fucking worst thing like what’s putting us back’ (Connor). For Euan, internal disputes and factioning often arise from personal relationships turning sour, confirming other research suggesting that the ‘libidinal economy’ of social movements both inspires and detracts from activism (Brown and Pickerill, 2009: 31). As division leader, he found himself often trying to ‘sort out a lot of people’s problems when they are having a fall out’ (Euan).

There are also positive assessments of the movement. Matt, although admitting he sometimes wonders whether it is all worth it, notes that ‘we’re slowly getting noticed’ and mentions small achievements, including objections to local planning applications that would not have happened ‘if it wasn’t for us’ (Matt). While not perfect, demonstrations are seen to serve their purpose, if only very gradually, of raising awareness (Chas). Chris says attending demonstrations makes him feel ‘You’ve got your word out’ and Connor concludes that, even if only one person listens to what is said, ‘You’re still making a change.’

A small number of respondents enthusiastically claim the future of the movement is in expanding internationally – ‘going global’ (Brett, Neil, Jason). Others presume the external environment – new flows of immigrants, new mosques being built, more awareness about grooming gangs – means numbers joining the movement in the future will rise (Andrew, Chas). Nonetheless, respondents remain largely sceptical about their own efficacy. Tim perceives the movement to be on a downward trajectory as ‘people are thinking there’s not enough results to the amount of work that’s being put in’ (Tim) while Richard, who stopped attending demos, states starkly that ‘You can do as much protesting as you want but I think it still don’t make a difference’ (Richard).
In the absence of hope that anything might really change, what sustains activism in the EDL? While the meanings attached to activism by respondents are considered in detail in Chapter 7, here it is noted only that activism is more than the outcome of the rational application of means in order to achieve specific aims. Ollie, for example, does not expect any outcome for himself: ‘It’s not that I’m doing it for myself, if I do something now and it just … makes it a little bit better for the people in the future then I’m still going to do it’ (Ollie).

What is striking about narratives among grassroots EDL activists is that while emotions such as anger, hate, fear and respect pepper their narratives, ‘hope’ is directly mentioned only once and in relation to its absence (Andrew). Lisa notes that ‘there’s got to be light at the end of the tunnel’ to give protests a meaning; although she does not say that she sees such a light.

In place of hope, respondents’ voices are filled with defiance and a determination not to ‘bow down’:

INT: And what do you think is the point of having these kinds of demonstrations?
CONNOR: To prove a point like we am there and that we ain’t gonna hide, we am gonna go out on the streets and we am gonna prove who we am. We am English and you aye gonna make us bow down and like not listen to you, we are gonna do it whether you like it or not.

‘No surrender’ – originally associated with Unionist slogans of ‘no surrender to the IRA’ – is commonly encountered in EDL discourse. ‘Nfse’ (‘no fucking surrender ever’) is a frequent sign off on posts or inbox messages, while one of the core chants at demonstrations is ‘No surrender, No surrender, No surrender to the Taliban’ (see Chapter 7). Ed talked about a tattoo he was planning for his chest consisting of the acronym ‘Sinao’ (‘Surrender is not an option’).27 Kane expresses his determination to ‘never surrender’ even in the face of declining numbers, ‘cause I believe what they am fighting for and the reasons why we am normally there’. Expressing this in a more positive vein, Tim explains that the EDL for him is a way to ‘stand up’ for what you believe in and feel that at least ‘we tried’:

I stand up for things and what I believe in. I’ve been in trouble in the past just for purely standing up for things like I remember the first time I ever got arrested I was 15 and it was because I’d seen an older lad … picking on one of my friend’s younger brothers and I caught him doing it and I went over and I said ‘I’m not gonna let this happen’, and it’s like ‘if you wanna pick on someone try someone who’ll fight back’ you know. … Me, I’d rather be able to sleep at night knowing that I’ve tried than knowing that I didn’t bother. (Tim)

Mouffe (2005: 69–71) has argued that right-wing populist movements in Britain today are able to exploit popular frustration by drawing on unacceptable
mechanisms of xenophobic exclusion to provide people with some form of hope that things could be different. While at a deeper, existential, level, Mouffe may be right, the findings of this study provide little evidence that EDL activists are ‘hopeful’ about the future or, even less, have any sense that that future is in their hands. The movement is sustained, at the rational level, rather by a sense of collective duty to have ‘at least tried’ and a ‘no surrender’ ethos. The significance of the affective dimension in sustaining the movement is discussed in Chapter 7.

Conclusion

At the time of writing the EDL is in the process of reshaping itself from ‘Tommy Robinson’s barmy army’ into a broader-based and stable organisation. Steering the movement through this ‘state of flux’ is not a simple task according to the EDL’s Chair at the time, who was conscious above all of the need to ‘stop it from morphing into something dark which is where it could well have gone’ (Eddowes, 2015). The task is complicated further by the acute reflexive engagement of the movement with its own representation. The movement is routinely subjected to caricature and ridicule as racist, thuggish, drunken and uneducated and this is experienced as a major obstacle to efficacy; indeed the failure to rid the movement of this association is ostensibly the reason for the resignation of its founding leaders.

In contrast to the ‘victim’ relationship the EDL perceives itself to have in relation to traditional media, it has used new or social media extensively to organise, network and disseminate. However, this chapter has suggested that the relationship between the media, new and old, and the EDL is more complex than it appears in existing literature. While social media have been employed effectively to circumvent ‘media blackout’, it remains a site of tension; despite significant control over Facebook use being devolved to local divisions, the right to ‘say it as it is’ is a constant source of conflict between older and younger and between admin and rank-and-file members of the organisation. Moreover, although the social media do play a crucial role in everyday recruitment, bonding and organisation, many members are highly sceptical and often hostile to the medium. Trust and loyalty are valued above anything and those are gained only through face-to-face activities. Finally, the importance of the new media does not mean the old media have lost their significance; media representations of the movement confirm a sense of ‘conspiracy’ between political and cultural elites to silence ‘working class’ or ‘ordinary’ voices and concerns and thus serve a bonding function.

The EDL has, contrary to widespread expectation, survived – albeit in a diminished form – the resignation in October 2013 of its co-founders and leaders. Currently it is locked in a process of ‘metamorphosis’ in which new forms of organisation and strategy are engaged with on a basis of ‘trial and error’ (Eddowes, 2015). While its evolution into a more sophisticated political organisation is not impossible in the future, its current aim is modest; to survive as ‘a platform for people to come to when they’ve finally had enough’ (2015).
Notes

1 A phrase used initially by representatives of the Quilliam Foundation who facilitated and announced the resignations. See www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2449542/Tommy-Robinson-quits-leader-EDL.html. Accessed: 26.08.2015.

2 A group of around twenty members of the group held inflammatory banners and shouted abuse at soldiers of the 2nd battalion of the Royal Anglian Regiment returning from a six-month tour in Iraq (Copsey, 2010: 9).

3 In February 2014, the EDL announced that ‘mass immigration’ would, in the future, be included in the EDL’s mission statement (www.englishdefenceleague.org/edl-announces-new-chairman. Accessed: 28.03.2014). However, this materialised only in a new version of the mission statement released on 3 January 2016 (see Chapter 4).

4 See http://englishdefenceleague.org/about-us/mission-statement. Accessed 26.06.2012. It is this mission statement that is referred to throughout this book unless otherwise stated. The revised version was released only in 2016 and thus was not known to respondents.

5 ‘Islamic courts’ is a phrase used by EDL members to refer to what they perceive to be an alternative legal system in operation in the UK. It is not clear whether they refer here to Sharia Councils, which provide legal advice and rulings primarily on marriage and finances based on Sharia law although have no legal authority in the UK, or to the Muslim Arbitration Tribunal, which is an alternative dispute resolution structure governed by the UK Arbitration Act.

6 This position also calls for the recognition that Islam has social and ideological aspects in addition to being a faith and that its principles, in some cases, contradict those of liberal democracy and therefore have implications for non-Muslims living alongside Muslims.

7 The Quilliam Foundation is a counter-extremism think tank chaired by Maajid Nawaz and funded, initially, under the UK government’s ‘Prevent’ programme designed to counter (primarily Islamic) violent extremism (PVE).

8 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=9RTa0vmFCAY. Accessed: 14.04.2014.

9 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=YsfovbkDi0M. This video has been removed by YouTube because its content violated the company’s terms of service.

10 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9zTQRFeII.

11 For the Memorandum of Understanding governing the collaboration of these European defence leagues, see http://englishdefenceleague.org/european-defence-leagues. Accessed: 26.6.2012.

12 As noted in Chapter 2, all quotes are cited verbatim from the interview transcripts or field notes including where regional speech patterns do not conform to standard English grammar. Where these patterns might obscure meaning, the standard English equivalent is noted. In this quote ‘aye’ means ‘am not’ and ‘day’ means ‘don’t’.

13 In sharp contrast, Ezekiel (2002: 54) notes that in seven years of study of the white racist scene in the USA he never heard a speech by a woman.

14 Curtis had been tipped to stand in for Tommy Robinson while he was in prison but had left the movement and flirted with the British version of ‘Golden Dawn’ and then the EVF.

15 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6fmJeYOiLQ.

16 Besides the 19-year-old leader of the LGBT division who already held a prominent position in the movement, a further eight respondents in this study (including two 16
year olds and two women) noted their desire to ‘move up’ the movement and be one of the people who organised rather than demonstrated.

17 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6fmJeYOiLQ). Accessed 11.12.2014.
18 See http://search.electoralcommission.org.uk/Api/Accounts/Documents/16078.
19 See http://extremisproject.org/2012/10/the-english-defence-league-edl-what-do-people-think. Accessed: 5.05.2014.
20 It started when a YouTube video featuring an inarticulate EDL supporter at the Blackburn demo (the individual referenced in the discussion between Ray and Chris above) went viral (see www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIPD8qHhtVU). It began to be used by groups opposing the EDL to demonstrate the stupidity of EDL members before being reappropriated by EDL supporters and used as a resource for self-irony.
21 A photograph of this placard can be found at: www.thisisbristol.co.uk/pictures/Bristol-EDL-march-anti-EDL-protests/pictures-1653626-detail/pictures.html. Accessed: 24.08.2015.
22 The National Front (NF) is a far right ‘whites only’ political party founded in 1967 and most active during the 1970s, when it secured just over 3 per cent of the vote in those seats contested in the 1974 General Elections, but splintered over the course of the 1980s following a decline in electoral success after the first Thatcher government came to power in 1979 (Goodwin et al., 2010; Allen, 2011; Solomos, 2013). As discussed below the NF is one of the groups from which the EDL is keen to dissociate itself.
23 Of course much non-EDL related material is also shared on these pages, including: information about causes supported by but not linked to the EDL, personal images and messages, pictures of new tattoos or haircuts and humorous ‘motivational’ posters, YouTube videos of favourite songs, updates on relationship status, arguments, plans for the evening, football results etc.
24 See www.englishdefenceleague.org/splinter-groups. Issued: 16.01.2014. Accessed: 25.11.2014.
25 See www.englishdefenceleague.org/suspicions-raised-about-nationalist-demonstration-on-8th-october-and-neo-nazi-named-and-shamed. Issued: 19.09.2014. Accessed 24.11.2014.
26 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=c6fmJeYOiLQ.
27 There are clear loyalist connections to the use of these phrases and the links between EDL and loyalist groups is worthy of further researcher and discussion.