

Permission to Hate: Political Rhetoric and the United Kingdom Riots 2024

MICHAEL DHANOYA (University of Leicester). Email: md493@leicester.ac.uk.

Abstract

The Southport stabbings that took place on 29 July 2024, resulted in widespread rioting across the United Kingdom throughout the summer of the same year. This civil unrest served as a platform for copious expressions of Islamophobic and anti-migrant sentiment. Following the LIAS-funded 'Reading the Riots' workshop, this paper is dedicated to outlining the events that unfolded in Southport and subsequently across the United Kingdom in 2024, along with highlighting the irresponsible rhetoric uttered by politicians that, it is argued, engendered manifestations of hate directed towards the nation's migrant and Muslim populations. Whilst doing so, this paper also references examples of irresponsible political rhetoric triggering expressions of hate against said populations both before and after the riots. This highlights that what took place across the summer of 2024 was not an anomaly, but rather an example of the spectre that haunts British society, namely, that of political rhetoric granting the citizenry the permission to hate and target the nation's most vulnerable. Looking to the future, this paper concludes that this spectre is likely to continue to endure.

Introduction

The Southport stabbings that took place on 29 July 2024, resulted in widespread rioting across the United Kingdom throughout July and August of the same year. Such civil unrest served as a platform for copious expressions of Islamophobic and anti-migrant sentiment. The LIAS-funded 'Reading the Riots' workshop (hosted in May 2025) highlighted the fact that the political discourse concerning the nation's migrant and Muslim populations leading up to the summer of 2024 engendered much of the violence. The rest of this paper reviews examples of contemporary British political rhetoric to highlight how such utterances have consistently attempted to instil fear into the populace by depicting such populations as the 'other' that is to be feared, thereby resulting in manifestations of hate by the former against the latter. Accordingly, this paper argues that what took place across the summer of 2024 was not an anomaly but rather an example of the spectre that haunts British society, namely, that of the nation's most vulnerable being targeted as a direct result of irresponsible political rhetoric granting the citizenry the permission to hate.

Political Rhetoric and the Permission to Hate

The socio-political realm cannot be disentangled from expressions of hate. This is because the former serves as the platform via which divisive ideologies and discourse that seek to engage in the process of 'othering' are circulated by political actors and disseminated into the collective psyche of the general populace. This othering process enables individuals to simultaneously cultivate a sense of self and their 'in-group' against notions of there being a group or groups of people who serve as the other and the 'out-group(s)', thereby resulting in an 'Us vs Them' mentality with individuals internalising a prejudice in favour of their in-group. Constructing notions of there being a sub-sect(s) of the communal population who are to be deemed as the nefarious and threatening 'other' enables political actors to convey that said sub-sect(s) are responsible for all the ills visited upon society (be they social, political, cultural, or otherwise) (Perry, 2001). Socio-political theatres may therefore be deemed the warm petri dishes in which hateful attitudes held by members of the public towards those belonging to the 'out-group' are able to ferment. As it is the political actors who are responsible for the information received by the wider population, the former grant the latter permission to hate and, by direct consequence, permission to perpetrate acts of hate. Such a position becomes evident when reviewing examples of irresponsible political discourse triggering manifestations of hate.

British politicians have a history of empowering those groups that seek to target the marginalised in society. Indeed, in his 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech, the then-Conservative MP, Enoch Powell, stated that migrants entering the nation from the Commonwealth risked resulting in English natives becoming 'strangers in their own country', with such rhetoric of national displacement intensifying the scrutiny placed upon the nation's migrant population (Atkins, 2018). Moreover, 1978 saw the then-Conservative MP, Margaret Thatcher, similarly engage in rhetoric that legitimised anxieties prevalent within the general national populace surrounding rates of immigration and thus hostilities towards those of ethnic minority backgrounds, by declaring that the native population of these shores feared being 'swamped by people with a different culture' (Barker, 1981).

In more recent times, whilst writing an article for the Daily Telegraph in 2018, former Conservative MP and Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, requested that Muslim women not wear the Burqa when visiting him at his constituency surgery, whilst also referring to those women who did wear this traditional female Islamic garment as 'letterboxes' and 'bank robbers'. Such rhetoric, whilst echoing the sentiments made by former Labour MP and Cabinet Minister, Jack Straw in 2006 (Allen, 2020), also triggered the largest spike in Islamophobic abuse witnessed in 2018 (namely a 375% increase), with the former PM's comments being frequently parroted by the perpetrators of such abuse (Dearden, 2019). Seemingly, the latter deemed their actions permissible due to the sentiments expressed by the former, who sought to depict Muslims as adhering to values irreconcilably foreign to those held by the United Kingdom's non-Muslim population.

Similarly, irresponsible political rhetoric was on display leading up to the United Kingdom's European Union Membership referendum, which occurred on 23 June 2016 (Reid, 2019). Politicians engaged in the campaign to have the United Kingdom leave the European Union cultivated a narrative in keeping with the Great Replacement Theory (a theory that states that Caucasian populations throughout Europe are being replaced by non-Caucasian populations), as evidenced by the poster produced by Nigel Farage (the then-leader of the United Kingdom Independence Party), which depicted a large gathering of refugees (predominantly comprised of military-age males of dark-skinned complexion), along with the caption, 'BREAKING POINT: The EU has failed us all' (Stewart and Mason, 2016). Farage's message was clear. Migrants in the United Kingdom were a problematic and undesirable other who did not belong. Thus, the only solution was to leave the European Union, as doing so would also ensure that migrants would be forced to leave these shores. That this message was received by some is reflected in the fact that the wake of the referendum triggered a surge in online social media posts that declared the aforementioned result as being necessary to stem the invasion of this nation by Muslims who hold to an Islamic worldview that is, more specifically, antithetical to a Western outlook (Evolvi, 2018). Evidently, the 'Leave' campaign granted citizens permission to hate and to subsequently act upon their hateful sentiments.

These examples highlight how British politicians have repeatedly constructed the image of both Muslims and migrants as the 'other', who are irrevocably different from 'us', thereby entailing that the presence of both populations on home soil ought to be eradicated. Moreover, such examples highlight how the normalisation of such rhetoric has real-world consequences. Such notions also became evident in the lead-up to the 2024 United Kingdom general election. This epoch witnessed Rishi Sunak (the then-Prime Minister and leader of the Conservative Party) vow to prevent migrants from entering the country by way of crossing the English Channel, a pledge encapsulated by the slogan, 'Stop the boats' (Sunak, 2024). As with the other examples cited, such political rhetoric found a receptive audience amongst members of the general populace, as is evidenced by the riots that erupted across the United Kingdom in the wake of the Southport stabbings.

The United Kingdom Riots 2024

Despite the fact that Rudakubana was born to Rwandan Christian Tutsi parents, the immediate aftermath of the stabbings in Southport saw social media accounts spread misinformation by declaring that the then-unknown perpetrator was a Muslim migrant (Lawless, 2025). Accordingly, Muslim communities across the country were victimised amid the riots. The immediate aftermath of the murders saw protesters gather outside a mosque in Southport, before chanting 'No surrender!' and 'English 'till I die!', whilst also hurling projectiles at the building (Badshah, Lowe, Vinter and Mackay, 2024). Similarly, rioters across the country also hurled projectiles at mosques (Wareham, 2024), whilst chanting a slew of Islamophobic slogans, such as 'save our kids', 'we want our country back' (Riddell, 2024), 'Allah, Allah, who the f***

is Allah?’ (Halliday, 2024) and ‘paedo Muslims off our street’ (Middleton, 2024). Finally, rioters also identified and congregated outside hotels that were said to be housing migrants. Various acts of vandalism were then perpetrated against such buildings, with reports of rioters smashing hotel windows, attempting to break into such buildings, and engaging in acts of arson. Such acts accompanied the chanting of various slogans such as ‘we want our country back’ and ‘get them out’ (BBC News, 2024). Finally, rioters nationwide often chanted the phrase, ‘stop the boats’ (Al Jazeera, 2024). Such details provide incontrovertible evidence concerning the real-life consequences of the rhetoric imbued within Sunak’s doomed election campaign.

The violence and rhetoric expressed during the riots are clear examples of attacks made against the visual symbols of Islam and Muslims. Thus, such attacks sought to ‘other’ this community and to demarcate it from the general non-Muslim populace. The rationale for doing so is encoded in the slogans chanted amid the unrest. Such slogans are indicative of the rioters fearing that the presence of Muslims is to be equated with there being a risk of the displacement of the majority non-Muslim population and the supposed ‘Islamisation’ of the nation. Moreover, some of the chanting reflected the familiar Islamophobic trope equating Islam and Muslims with paedophilia. In chanting such slogans, the rioters sought to portray Muslims as holding to a worldview that is insidiously incongruent with British values (whatever is meant by the latter). Similarly, it has been well documented that hotels across the country have been housing migrants. Thus, to target such hotels was to attack visual representations of this population. The slogans chanted in reference to migrants intended to depict this population as being an unwanted alien presence that seeks to de-anglicise the nation. By congregating outside buildings that have come to be associated with and are thus visual symbols of identity of the aforementioned populations, such slogans are attempts made by the rioters to view both Muslims and migrants as the ‘others’, who possess non-native and antagonistic cultural values. Moreover, that the rhetoric expressed in the country’s political theatre prior to the Southport stabbings resulted in the hateful sentiments and acts that subsequently manifested is incontrovertible. Indeed, the details provided in this paper have highlighted that the events that unfolded across the summer of 2024 were not altogether unsurprising and were, rather, a predictable element of the cycle that sees irresponsible political rhetoric trigger manifestations of hate across the United Kingdom. This point is further reinforced when the events that have played out since the riots are considered.

After the Riots

On 12 May 2025, Keir Starmer delivered a speech concerning the publication of an immigration white paper. Within his speech, Starmer stated that should migrants fail to assimilate to the requisite level as set out in said white paper, then the country risks becoming an ‘island of strangers’ (Starmer, 2025). In response to the speech, Robert Jenrick (who at the time was a Conservative MP but has since defected to Reform UK) declared that the United Kingdom had already become such a nation (Sky

News, 2025). To be clear, with an approval rating of 13% (Rayner, 2025), Starmer does not influence the general populace. Indeed, it seems increasingly likely that the next United Kingdom general election (currently set to occur in 2029) will see the end of Starmer's premiership and his career discarded to the political scrapheap. Nevertheless, the fact that the leader of the sitting government and a member of an opposition party made public statements that hauntingly echoed the aforesaid Powellite and Thatcherite rhetoric by demonising the country's migrant population not only highlights that any lessons that emerged from the riots of 2024 have gone unheeded but also provides those intent on harming said population with the licence to do so.

Moreover, 2025 saw further demonstrations take place outside various hotels throughout the country that reportedly housed migrants. Indicative of Sunak's legacy as Prime Minister being his framing of migrants as an unwelcome alien presence, these demonstrations have seen further utterances of the slogan, 'stop the boats' (Barlow and Reidy, 2025; James, 2025). Finally, the 13 September 2025 witnessed Tommy Robinson (a prominent British far-right activist known for his anti-Islam and anti-immigration attitudes) organise the 'Unite the Kingdom' rally. The event saw far-right activists, commentators and politicians from across the globe deliver speeches to the approximately 150,000 people in attendance. Predictably, the content of these speeches focused on a popular far-right trope, namely, the great displacement of the native Caucasian peoples of the United Kingdom at the hands of the nation's Muslim and migrant populations. Indeed, along with warning those in attendance that Islam is the enemy of the United Kingdom and needed to be removed, the speakers also stated that the country was being colonised by a migrant population of Muslims who are murderers and rapists. It must also be noted that such rhetoric by the speakers was accompanied by the attendees chanting slogans, such as 'Send them back' (HOPE not hate, 2025). Evidently, far from being an isolated incident, the 2024 riots are, unfortunately, one epoch in a continuing cycle of irresponsible political rhetoric being uttered across the United Kingdom's socio-political spaces and resulting in manifestations of hate.

What Next?

This paper has highlighted how this country's political actors routinely construct groups of people as being either part of the 'in-group' or 'out-group' (with the latter being comprised of the nation's Muslim and migrant populations), with such social modelling often inspiring expressions of hateful sentiment and acts from members of the former towards the latter. Thus, the events that unfolded in the days after the Southport stabbings are unsurprising and must rather be deemed the latest iteration of a familiar pattern of events. Yet, out of all the examples cited in this paper of political rhetoric triggering episodes of hate, it was those stated by government officials prior to the Southport stabbings that caused the greatest degree of civil unrest. Accordingly, it is a reasonable expectation that such events would act as an epochal moment, where the ruling elites would engage in a process of reflection in a

bid to understand what lessons could be learned regarding what caused the riots and how to ensure that public disorder on a nationwide scale would never again be repeated. However, as evidenced, the ruling elites continue to demonise Muslims and migrants, thereby granting those hostile to such individuals the permission to hate. Thus, when considering what the future holds concerning political rhetoric and its impact on the nation's most vulnerable, the answer is clear. More of the same. The spectre of irresponsible political rhetoric will continue to haunt British society.

References

- Al Jazeera (2024) 'Far-right rioters attack asylum seeker hotels in UK's Rotherham, Tamworth', *Al Jazeera*, 04 August. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/8/4/far-right-rioters-attack-hotel-housing-asylum-seekers-in-uk> (Accessed 1 October 2025).
- Allen, C. (2020) *Reconfiguring Islamophobia: A Radical Rethinking of a Contested Concept*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Atkins, J. (2018) "'Strangers in their own country": epideictic rhetoric and communal definition in Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech', *The Political Quarterly*, 89(3), pp. 362-369. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12548>.
- Badshah, N., Lowe, Y., Vinter, R. and Mackay, H. (2024) 'Southport stabbing: chaotic scenes as police clash with far-right protesters outside mosque - as it happened', *The Guardian*, 30 July. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/live/2024/jul/30/southport-stabbing-latest-knife-attack-children-hospital-merseyside?page=with%3Ablock-66a939738f0891104a9d9687#block-66a939738f0891104a9d9687> (Accessed: 1 October 2025).
- Barker, M. (1981) *The New Racism: Conservatives and the Ideology of the Tribe*. Junction Books.
- Barlow, P. and Reidy, C. (2025) 'Bikers gather in Dover for illegal migrant protest', *BBC News* [Online], 27 April. Available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c87pqnn803yo> (Accessed: 1 October 2025).
- BBC News. (2024) 'PM slams 'far-right thuggery' after hotel violence', *BBC News*, 4 August. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/crg44dx9lz9o> (Accessed: 1 October 2025).
- Dearden, L. (2019) 'Islamophobic incidents rose 375% after Boris Johnson compared Muslim women to "letterboxes", figures show', *The Independent*, 2 September. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/boris-johnson-muslim-women-letterboxes-burqa-islamphobia-rise-a9088476.html> (Accessed: 8 October 2025).
- Evolvi, G. (2018) 'Hate in a Tweet: Exploring Internet-Based Islamophobic Discourses', *Religions*, 9(10), 307. Available at: <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/9/10/307>.

Halliday, J. (2024) 'Rioter who punched police officer in face in Southport jailed for three years', *The Guardian*, 7 August. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/article/2024/aug/07/rioter-southport-jailed-far-right#:~:text=The%20prosecutor%20said%20missiles%20including,hands%20oup%20to%20his%20offending%E2%80%9D>. (Accessed: 1 October 2025).

HOPE not hate (2025) 'Britain's Biggest Far-Right Protest: More than 100,000 attend Tommy Robinson's Unite The Kingdom Rally', *HOPE not hate*, 13 September. Available at: <https://hopenothate.org.uk/2025/09/13/britains-biggest-far-right-protest-more-than-100000-attend-tommy-robinsons-unite-the-kingdom-rally/> (Accessed: 1 October 2025).

James, I. (2025) 'Arrests after asylum hotel protests in England', *BBC News*, 2 August. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c6276rlwdqko> (Accessed 1 October 2025).

Lawless, J. (2025) 'UK police struggled to counter online falsehoods that fueled summer violence, lawmakers say', *AP News*, 14 April. Available at: <https://apnews.com/article/uk-children-stabbed-online-misinformation-3e63802d77c8213cfc8226ead86c6100> (Accessed: 1 October 2025).

Middleton, J. (2024) 'Far-right thugs in violent clashes with police as unrest spreads to cities across UK', *The Independent*, 3 August. Available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/southport-protests-enough-riots-far-right-b2590700.html> (Accessed 01 October 2025).

Perry, B. (2001) *In the Name of Hate: Understanding Hate Crimes*. Routledge.

Rayner, G. (2025) 'Starmer is least popular PM on record, poll finds', *The Telegraph* [Online], 27 September. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2025/09/27/starmer-least-popular-uk-prime-minister-poll/> (Accessed: 1 October 2025).

Reid, A. (2019) 'Buses and Breaking Point: Freedom of Expression and the "Brexit" Campaign', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 22(3), pp. 623-637. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10677-019-09999-1>.

Riddell, K. (2024) 'Car overturned and set on fire in Sunderland disorder as riot police attacked', *Chronicle Live*, 2 August. Available at: <https://www.chroniclive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/car-overturned-set-fire-sunderland-29669357> (Accessed: 1 October 2025).

Sky News (2025) 'Robert Jenrick claims UK "already island of strangers" - and names locations with "segregated society"', *Sky News*, 13 May. Available at: <https://news.sky.com/story/jenrick-claims-uk-already-island-of-strangers-and-names-locations-with-segregated-society-13366987> (Accessed: 1 October 2025).

Starmer, K. (2025) *PM remarks at Immigration White Paper press conference: 12 May 2025*. 12 May, Prime Minister's Office, London. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-remarks-at-immigration-white-paper-press-conference-12-may-2025>.

Stewart, H. and Mason, R. (2016) 'Nigel Farage's anti-migrant poster reported to police', *The Guardian*, 16 June. Available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/jun/16/nigel-farage-defends-ukip-breaking-point-poster-queue-of-migrants> (Accessed: 1 October 2025).

Sunak, R. (2024) *Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's statement on the plan to stop the boats: 22 April 2024*. 22 April, Prime Minister's Office, London. Available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-minister-rishi-sunaks-statement-on-the-plan-to-stop-the-boats-22-april-2024>.

Swami, V., Barron, D., Weis, L. and Furnham, A. (2018) 'To Brexit or not to Brexit: The roles of Islamophobia, conspiracist beliefs, and integrated threat in voting intentions for the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum', *British Journal of Psychology*, 109(1), pp. 156-179. Available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1111/bjop.12252> (Accessed: 1 October 2025).

Wareham, S. (2024) 'Men threw bricks at mosque during disorder', *BBC News*, 24 September. Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c9dyjxw85yvo> (Accessed: 2 October 2025).

About the author

MICHAEL DHANOYA is a PhD student in the School of Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy, University of Leicester, UK.

LIAS Working Paper Series

The Leicester Institute for Advanced Studies is an interdisciplinary centre of excellence based at the University of Leicester. Dedicated to creating a collaborative and inspiring environment, it brings together researchers from across all disciplines to deliver ambitious, transformative, and impactful research.

Since 2018, the Leicester Institute for Advanced Studies has published a working paper series. The series allows our projects and partners to publish interdisciplinary research in a range of formats in order to stimulate debate about emerging research areas and complex research questions.

Leicester Institute for Advanced Studies,
University of Leicester,
University Road,
Leicester,
LE1 7RH,
United Kingdom
le.ac.uk/research/institutes/lias
lias@leicester.ac.uk

