

Weaponising the Far-Right Narrative in Response to the Post-Southport Unrest in 2024

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the construction and deployment of the “far-right” narrative in response to the unrest that followed the Southport murders in the summer of 2024. Drawing on discussions from the interdisciplinary “Reading the Riots” workshop, it explores how political and media narratives shape public understandings of complex social events. The analysis argues that the rapid adoption of the far-right explanation by government, mainstream media, and advocacy organisations was accompanied by limited evidential support and often relied on broad and contested definitions of the term itself. By reviewing official reports, parliamentary inquiries, and policing assessments, the paper identifies a significant disparity between the dominant narrative and available evidence concerning the motivations and backgrounds of those involved in the unrest. It further considers the potential functions of the narrative, including the denial, dismissal, and de-legitimisation of wider social grievances, particularly among sections of the white working class. The paper concludes that the far-right narrative operated as a powerful political framing device and warns that its continued deployment risks obscuring underlying social tensions while potentially contributing to further political polarisation.

1. Introduction

On 4 August 2024, the Prime Minister – Keir Starmer – delivered a statement about the unrest that had spread across towns and cities in England and Northern Ireland in the wake of the murder of three young girls by Axel Rudakubana in Southport, Merseyside days beforehand. Starmer was condemnatory: “This is not protest. It is organised, violent thuggery...” he said before adding that those involved would face “...the full force of the law” (Prime Minister’s Office, 2024). As to who was involved, for the Prime Minister, it was the ‘far-right’. As he put it, “I won’t shy away from calling this what it is: far-right thuggery”. Established as the ‘official’ explanation from the outset, Starmer’s ‘far-right narrative’ was quickly and uncritically adopted by others in government as also by much of the mainstream (legacy) media and various others in

the public square. However, as the discussions had during the LIAS-funded 'Reading the Riots' workshop in May 2025 noted, the quick and uncritical adoption of this narrative was not without problem. This paper builds on these interdisciplinary discussions, critically – and provocatively – revisiting the far-right narrative to prompt new thinking about its problematic nature and potential function.

2. Contextualising the Narrative

As is the case with any 'story' that needs telling, narratives serve an important function. In the political space, Dauite and Lightfoot (2004) argue that function is most evident in how narratives present an 'official' version of events that are organised and mediated by those in positions of political power. In doing so, official narratives serve to valorise ways of thinking and understanding that are fully aligned with political leaders among those who have little or no political power or agency (Isakjee and Allen, 2013). This is achieved by conveying easily understandable information that is devoid of complexity and does not depend on the need for wider reading or critical thought. In doing so, narratives inform what Hall and O'Shea (2013) refer to as 'common sense'.

To better understand the extent to which this was true of the summer 2024 unrest, it is necessary to consider what was meant by 'far-right'. Despite the term being well known and widely perceived as representing something that is inherently 'bad', Starmer afforded little clarity about precisely what or who the far-right was or might have been. This might have been, as Mudde (2007) explains, down to the fact that far-right is an expansive and all-inclusive term: one that is used to refer to a broad spectrum of different ideologies, actions and behaviours associated with those on the right. In recent years, what is seen to be far-right has however, expanded even further to nowadays include anti-establishment populism, calls to protect the sovereignty of the people, and the rejection of certain minority rights at the expense of the majority (Wodak, 2021). In this respect, far-right can mean everything and nothing.

As a result, far-right is also being increasingly used as a slur or insult by those on the political left to derogate those they - at times - merely disagree with (Williams, 2024). A brief search of who has been accused of being far-right in recent years highlights the breadth of this and includes: JK Rowling, the Harry Potter author for her views about gender; Jeremy Clarkson, the former presenter of the BBC's Top Gear series for voicing support for British farmers; and British academic Matthew Goodwin, accused of drinking the far-right 'Kool-Aid' after voicing support for Reform UK (Mulhall, 2025). Despite being accused of being far-right, none realistically are. This fits with a trend identified by Rovere (2025). As he explains, even expressing the slightest of concern about certain liberal causes - for instance immigration, gender ideology or abortion - is nowadays likely to result in being called far-right. The result, he explains, is that the term far-right not only becomes ever more meaningless, but so too does its contemporary use serve to distract and detract attention away from the real - and far more dangerous - far-right.

3. Evidencing the Narrative

As noted at the outset, the mainstream media was quick to adopt Starmer's far-right narrative where headlines and reporting about 'far-right riots' soon became the norm. One source of 'evidence' that was widely cited in support of this was the anti-fascist group, Hope Not Hate (HNH). As most media outlets reported, HNH was as unequivocal as Starmer in its version of the unrest. As HNH put it, the unrest was "farright [sic] demonstrations" that were organised by "far-right actors" and perpetrated by "feverish far-right gangs" (North, 2024). While HNH was keen to stress that the far-right had changed in recent years, its message - like that of the government and mainstream media - was loud and clear: the narrative was fact.

At the time, however, no far-right group appeared to have been in the kind of rude health needed to orchestrate unrest on the scale seen. Take for instance Britain First and the Democratic Football Lads Alliance. While both were involved in organising the Black Lives Matter counter-protests in central London in 2020, neither were known to have either the supporters or traction needed to mobilise the numbers seen post-Southport. Similar too as regards Patriotic Alternative. Despite being the largest and fastest growing far-right group in Britain, its supporter base had been significantly weakened by defections to other far-right groups including the Independent Nationalist Network and Homeland (Allen, 2024). While one member of Patriotic Alternative did share an image of himself at the Southport protest, this is far from conclusive evidence of the group itself being involved. Trying to extrapolate anything more would be wrong. Nonetheless, the evidence for the far-right's involvement seemingly amounted to little more than this and evidence that at least one of those involved had 'Nazi tattoos' (Bintliff and Sampson, 2024).

According to the mainstream media, the English Defence League (EDL) was co-ordinating the unrest. In response, the former First Minister of Scotland, Humza Yousaf called for the EDL to be proscribed as terrorists. In a letter to the Home Secretary Yvette Cooper, Yousaf said it was "time we took on the EDL and the evil ideology that drives them" (Brown, 2024). In reality, the letter was somewhat farcical given that the EDL were far from terrorists and as a group, had been defunct for most of the past decade. Having reached its peak in 2011, the number of people attending its protests dramatically decreased: from up to 3,000 to just six at a demonstration in 2017 (Sky News, 2024). Nonetheless, the far-right narrative spread to international news outlets; the unrest being reported as 'far-right riots' in Europe, North America and elsewhere. In all instances, the evidence for the far-right was the narrative and nothing more.

This is readily apparent in the findings from a number of respected reports into the unrest that have been published since. Take for instance the report of the Children's Commissioner. Focusing on 286 children and young people arrested during the unrest, the findings show that the primary drivers for their involvement was a deep distrust of

the police and feelings of unbelonging. Nowhere was there evidence of them being far-right or even anti-migrant and racist (Children's Commissioner, 2025). Similar too, the report from the Home Affairs Committee. In it, the Chief Constable of Cleveland Police Mark Webster is quoted as saying that the unrest was fuelled by 'opportunistic participation' combined with feelings of desperation, a lack of hope and a sense of having nothing to lose (Home Affairs Committee, 2025). As before, there was no reference to the far-right. Maybe the most conclusive however was His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary & Fire & Rescue Services. According to its investigation, "we found no conclusive or compelling evidence that the 2024 disorder was deliberately premeditated and co-ordinated by any specific group or network. Most people who took part in the disorder lived locally" (HMICFRS, 2025). Again, no evidence of the far-right being behind the unrest. A clear disparity between the narrative and the evidence is therefore evident.

4. The Function of the Narrative

Before trying to understand the potential or otherwise function of the far-right narrative, it is necessary to acknowledge that it is likely that at least some of those who participated in the unrest will have had some association with the far-right. Likewise, some – maybe many – are also likely to have shared some of the views held by the far-right. It is also right to point out that some protested peacefully despite the unrest taking place around them. In stating this, it is also necessary to point that it is entirely possible to hold and express concerns about immigration for instance without them being fuelled by the same racist, Islamophobic or any other hateful ideological viewpoint typical of the far-right. For more about the British far-right and its ideological transformation the past few decades, see Allen (2023). These are important and necessary considerations that need to be taken into consideration if we are to avoid homogenising or at least reducing all of those involved to a handful of essentialised characteristics. This is because far from there being a Machiavellian entity at play, all of the evidence would seem to suggest that the majority of those involved in the unrest were local people from local areas.

As such, the far-right narrative clearly served the function of official narratives established by Dauite and Lightfoot (2004) previously. In the context of the unrest, the narrative served to tell the 'story' of the unrest in accordance with how those in positions of political power wanted it to be told. Constructing and conveying the official version of events, the narrative was easy to understand and maybe most importantly, was wholly believable. Accordingly, this meant that it did not demand greater scrutiny. This was achieved through the regular and routine repetition of the narrative by the mainstream media and certain uncritical others. The far-right narrative therefore was a resounding success. So much so that despite evidence to the contrary, the consensus view remains that the unrest was both caused and perpetrated by the far-right, irrespective of whoever and whatever that might be.

Despite the lack of clarity about the far-right, some of the workshop discussions gave credence to the narrative serving a number of other potential functions. One of these

was the potential for the narrative to deny the fact that at least some - maybe many - of those involved were local people from local areas. If, as the evidence suggests, this was indeed the case, there are a number of reasons why those in positions of power might be reluctant to acknowledge it. The far-right element of the narrative therefore could be used to conveniently – if not necessarily, deliberately – obfuscate the reality of the unrest. Likewise, the narrative might have been used to deny the potential reality of the unrest. So too would it seem possible that another potential function of the narrative was to dismiss. Irrespective of whether those involved participated in peaceful or non-peaceful protest, rendering those involved as being far-right simultaneously rendered all of their concerns - legitimate or otherwise - as far-right also. In doing so, not only did the narrative serve to deny those involved a voice but so too did the narrative serve to dismiss all that they were trying to voice. To this end, merely being concerned about immigration could be - and indeed, was - immediately dismissed on the basis that the concerns - and anyone sharing them - were racist, Islamophobic and thereby, far-right.

During the workshop, some stressed the need for the emotional dimension of the unrest to be taken into account. In particular, it was felt that the role of fear should not be underplayed when trying to understand the unrest. Given the climate of fear that has been created by certain political figures about immigration in recent years, it is important to acknowledge that not only might certain communities feel fearful of the changes taking place around them but so too that it is possible for that sense of fear to be manifested in different forms and behaviours. Another emotion might have been grief for what some believe is being lost in terms of identity, culture, society or values among others. In this respect, it is possible for fear, grief and mourning to be manifested as anger.

Might another potential function of the far-right narrative therefore have been to divert accountability away from the political mainstream where politicians from all parties have used toxic rhetoric to stoke anger and fear about immigration for more than a decade; predating the Brexit referendum (Allen, 2021). While Brexit was conspicuous by its absence as regards attempts to explain and understand the unrest, the angry - and at times, violent - expression of anti-migrant sentiment that spread across the country post-Southport clearly cannot be disentangled from the strong anti-immigration feeling that was evident among a large swathe of those who voted 'leave'. An example of how the far-right narrative functioned in this way can be seen in how 'stop the boats', a slogan that was widely chanted during the unrest, was dismissed as far-right. Far from being far-right, 'stop the boats' was first coined by the former leader of the Conservative Party and the UK's first non-white Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak (Wallis & Stacey, 2024).

5. Weaponising the Narrative

When reflecting on the far-right narrative, it is important to take into account how this is not the only time such a narrative has been deployed by Starmer and his

government. A very similar narrative was deployed in January 2025 when the Prime Minister accused those calling for an inquiry into Britain's 'grooming gang scandal' of jumping on the 'far-right' bandwagon. Six months later, following Baroness Casey's recommendation for a national inquiry into 'group-based child sexual exploitation' (Casey, 2025), the narrative was revised. As Starmer was at pains to explain, claiming that when he said far-right he was referring only to those Conservative Party politicians who were calling for an inquiry now they were in opposition, despite having chosen not to do so while in power. Despite the clarification, it did little to assuage the widely held view that when Starmer deployed the term far-right he was referring to all those calling for an inquiry. Those doing so included both the victims and their communities, some of which would have been the same communities where at least some of the unrest occurred. It is also worth noting that the recent - and ongoing - demonstrations taking place outside migrant hotels across the country are also being described as 'far-right' albeit not specifically by Starmer (Dunt, 2025).

It would seem unlikely that a Prime Minister would make the same error of judgment twice as regards deploying the same far-right narrative in response to two different incidents. While maybe less so the mainstream media, it is interesting that the recent protests are widely being blamed upon the far-right. When considered together, there would appear to be one constant: the white working class. As discussed during the workshop, there was a view among some of the participants that the white working class were not only unfairly homogenised but so too increasingly problematised by those in positions of political power as also the mainstream media and liberal middle classes. As discussed, white working class is - for some - mere shorthand for those who were white, unemployed, poor and uneducated. So too were they routinely perceived to be prone to criminality and importantly, racist. Negatively framed, participants posited how the white working classes are nowadays seen as 'undesirables' who present a 'cultural problem' to contemporary liberal society.

To what extent then might the far-right narrative have also functioned as a weapon to deny, dismiss and demonise the white working classes? While the mere suggestion of such might seem far-fetched, there is only one constant that unifies the far-right narrative deployed in relation to the summer 2024 unrest with the far-right narratives deployed in response to the group-based child sexual exploitation scandal and ongoing migrant hotel protests and that is the white working classes. Acknowledging those in the workshop who spoke about the perceived failure to call out racism and Islamophobia in relation to the unrest, while the same might be posited as regards the ongoing migrant hotel protests, it cannot be posited towards group-based child sexual exploitation. As the Casey report illustrated, it was the fear of being seen to be racist or Islamophobic rather than actual racism or Islamophobia that was problematic (Casey, 2025).

Whether correct or otherwise, it would most definitely seem that the far-right narrative did more than merely tell the story of last summer's unrest. While some will no doubt be resistant to the argument that the narrative was weaponised in order to

deny, dismiss and demonise the white working classes, recent comments made by Dominic Cummings - former Chief Adviser to the Prime Minister during Boris Johnson's tenure - might be as relevant as they are telling. In a recent lecture for the Pharos Foundation titled "What Can Be Done?", Cummings claimed the government most definitely works with the 'old media' on various 'propaganda operations' to spread the message that the 'far-right' poses a significant threat to Britain's safety and security. Far-right, he explains, does not mean far-right *per se* but is instead governmental 'code' for white working classes (Pharos Foundation, 2025). If true, then it is not beyond the realm of possibility that the government and mainstream media are weaponising the far-right narratives they deploy.

While the constraints of this paper do not allow for a fuller or more thorough investigation, somewhat irrespective of whether the far-right narrative was - or indeed, is - being used as a weapon against Britain's white working classes, it would seem highly unlikely that concerns and protests about immigration are going to go away any time soon. On this basis, not only were the workshop discussions right to acknowledge the very real possibility that last year's unrest will be the blueprint for similar unrest in the future but so too that similar far-right narratives will continue to be deployed in response to them also. In the context of this paper, doing so will no doubt be as misunderstood as it is misguided on the basis that there is only one way for those who are repeatedly denied, dismissed and demonised to gravitate towards and that is towards the far-right. If left unchecked, the government's far-right narratives might evolve into a self-fulfilling prophecy: where those against whom the weaponised narratives are being deployed not only bolster and strengthen the far-right but so too provide them with the weapons with which to attack Starmer and his government.

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