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Future Identities: Changing identities in the UK – the next 10 years

DR9: How Might Changes in Political Allegiances Affect Notions of Identity in the Next Ten Years?

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1. Introduction

This evidence review considers how changes in political allegiances - mainly the rise of minor political parties since 2001 and declining political trust - might affect notions of identity, and impact on public behaviour over the next ten years. The review subscribes to the working definition of identity set out by the broader project, and considers both the impact of longer-term and deeper trends within the party system as well as more recent developments in the arena of party politics.¹ To ensure methodological quality, the review draws on peer-reviewed academic research from political science, political sociology and social psychology, gathered via the International Bibliography for the Social Sciences (IBSS).

¹ The Foresight Future of Identity project has put forward the following working definition of identity: 'An identity can be broadly understood as both a model of the world and of our place within it. Identities are bound up with (the possibility or impossibility of) action in the social world. An identity is derived relationally – that is, identities are shaped by a broader social context of power and status relations. An identity can be defined along a continuum from the personal to the social – however for the individual concerned identity is often experienced as both personal and social at the same time. Identities can be ascribed - that is, some identities can be imposed by others or can be 'written on the body' (as in gender or 'race'). Identities can also be elective – that is, we can decide to join protest groups, develop leisure identities, support football teams etc. Identities can be defined at different temporal levels: that is, some identities are more stable and enduring whilst others are more malleable and volatile.'

2. The Growing Significance of Minor Parties

In recent decades - and similar to other established democracies - a combination of deep and long-term trends have led to considerable change within the British party system. The most important include declining levels of party identification with the two main parties, reduced electoral turnout, declining levels of party membership, falling rates of activism, a more volatile electorate, and the increased importance of specific issues and perceptions of party competence as key drivers of voting behaviour (Butler and Stokes 1969; Crewe, Sarlvik and Alt 1977; Clarke *et al.* 2004, 2009; Heath, Jowell and Curtice 1985; Seyd and Whiteley 2002). The extent and impact of these changes remains contested, but there appears a general consensus that the party system has undergone significant change, and that these changes are likely to remain or accelerate over coming years. More broadly, it is also worth noting that recent research on patterns of civic engagement in Britain adopts a pessimistic outlook, suggesting that British democracy is 'beginning to show signs of strain and looks ineffective in many respects' (Whiteley 2012: 157-8).

It is within this broader context that minor parties have attracted increased support. In recent years, over 350 political parties have registered with the Electoral Commission, though clearly not all have exerted a significant electoral impact (Copus *et al.* 2009). Yet, in general terms, minor parties are attracting growing support at elections and at various levels of the political system. At the most recent general election in 2010, minor parties received 6.4% of the total vote, as compared to 5.7% in 2005 and 3.8% in 2001. Given that the rise of Celtic nationalism is being addressed in other evidence reviews, the most significant parties included the UK Independence Party (UKIP) that fielded 572 candidates, British National Party (BNP; 338 candidates), Green Party (310 candidates), English Democrats (107 candidates) and Respect Party (10 candidates). In addition, over 700 candidates represented a diverse array of alternative political parties and factions.

Yet with the notable exception of Brighton Pavilion (gained by the Greens in 2010), and Bradford West (gained by the Respect Party in 2012), these more recent examples of minor parties have consistently failed to engineer a major and sustained breakthrough at national elections. It is worth noting, however, that past examples of minor parties – such as the Liberal Democrats, Scottish National Party (SNP) and Plaid Cymru have – achieved significant breakthroughs. This difficulty has led current minor parties to focus on establishing an electoral presence at other levels of the political system, and building a base in legislative politics through 'second-order' local and European elections that often offer more favourable electoral systems. For example, there are currently thirteen UKIP, two BNP and two Green Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). The Green Party also has two seats on the Greater London Assembly (GLA), and dozens of councillors at the local level, while UKIP has set itself the (realistic) goal of finishing first at the next set of elections to the European Parliament in 2014.

When attempting to account for the increased relevance of minor parties, academics have advanced several explanations. Some interpret the rise of minor parties as primarily an outlet of voters' dissatisfaction with existing political choice and/or the functioning of the political system more broadly (Belanger 2004; Denmark and Bowler 2002; Poguntke 1996). Belanger argues that whereas the former attitude (i.e. dissatisfaction with the main parties) forms the

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basis of minor party support, the latter attitude (i.e. dissatisfaction with the system) forms the basis of voter abstention. Reflective of this view is the argument that growing support for minor parties and a rising number of independents have arisen 'because the mainstream, major national parties increasingly appear to fail to aggregate and represent adequately the diverse range of views and interests that make up the political dynamic at national, regional and local levels' (Copus *et al.* 2009). More recent contributions also stress the importance of 'valence' or 'performance politics' to understanding changes in voting behaviour, arguing that what matters most are public perceptions of how well the main parties have performed on the most important issues at that time (Clarke *et al.* 2009), although the debate over the precise nature of political dissatisfaction continues.

Some also contend that minor party support is determined by the broader institutional and political context that constrains or facilitates the prospect of elected representation. 'Second-order' local and European elections are considered to be of particular importance to minor party development, on the basis that they are used by voters to register their dissatisfaction with the established parties while not necessarily threatening the formation of the incumbent national government (Reif and Schmitt 1980). Still others link the growth of minor parties to the salience of specific issues, such as the emergence of the Respect Party in response to the Iraq War (see Peace 2012). The importance of this issue is reflected in the social bases of support for the party: Respect has tended to perform strongest in areas where there are large numbers of Muslims and disproportionately high rates of ethnic diversity more generally (though especially in the London region). Aside from a non-white population, the Respect vote is also positively associated with younger rather than older voters, disproportionately high levels of unemployment and economic deprivation, and low levels of owner-occupied housing (Borisyuk *et al.* 2007; Curtice, Fisher and Steed 2005).

An alternative view traces the rise of minor parties to broader processes of value change in established Western democracies. Whereas some parties have arisen to fill a specific niche in the political arena - such as the birth of Respect in response to the Iraq War - others such as the Greens have been fuelled by a broad shift toward more progressive post-material values in Britain. Importantly, this process of post-material value change has not affected every social group in the same way. Rising support for the Greens has been traced to groups who are most likely to endorse progressive positions: younger and better educated citizens who tend to be employed in the public sector, and are more secure and flexible within the labour market. These voters tend to identify with left-wing politics, are more likely to endorse post-materialist views and are especially positive toward the Liberal Democrats (Franklin and Rudig 1995). At aggregate-level, support for the Greens has been traced to University towns and urban areas, where there are large numbers of citizens who do not consider themselves to be religious, and within 'intellectually charged urban atmospheres where traditional value systems have the least hold and residents rely on public services, such as transport' (Birch 2009). Others similarly trace support for the Greens to middle-class-dominated areas in southern England, and (as above) to younger citizens and those with higher education qualifications (Carter 2001; Knutsen 2004; Pattie *et al.* 1991).

It is important to note, however, that alongside the shift toward postmaterialism others have pointed to a 'backlash' among citizens who are less well educated, financially insecure amidst a shift toward a post-industrial global economy, and profoundly hostile toward the onset of immigration and rising cultural diversity. In contrast to the groups above, these 'losers of modernisation' (Betz 1994) have formed a 'silent counter-revolution' (Ignazi 1992) against the rise of post-material and progressive politics. Instead of endorsing left-wing groups, these citizens have shifted behind minor parties that campaign against the established parties,

immigration and minority groups. In Britain, the rise of right-wing minor parties – such as the BNP and UKIP – should be set against the backdrop of growing public concern over a new phase of immigration into Britain that commenced in the late 1990s (McLaren and Johnson 2007), the increased salience of security-related issues such as terrorism (Clarke *et al.* 2009), and a more specific sense of anxiety over the role of settled Muslims and Islam in British society (Ford 2010). Between 1995 and 2008, for example, the proportion of citizens favouring a reduction in migration levels increased from 63 per to 78 per cent (Ford, Morrell and Heath 2012), while there also emerged significant levels of public anxiety over the perceived compatibility of British Muslim communities (Voas and Ling 2010).

Social psychologists often trace this anti-immigrant and xenophobic anxiety to actual or perceived ‘threats’ (Allport 1954). When citizens feel threatened, they shift behind racist or xenophobic parties as part of an instrumental attempt to preserve or enhance the position of their own group (Schlueter, Schmidt and Wagner 2008). Across Europe this sense of threat has been shown to be a key driver of prejudice and anti-immigration sentiment, which in turn has fuelled the rise of challenger right-wing parties (Schneider 2008). This evidence base also reveals an important distinction between two types of threat. According to a first approach anchored in ‘realistic group conflict theory’, the main driver of hostility toward minorities is a sense that tangible economic resources such as jobs, social housing or the state of the national economy are under threat from immigration and rising diversity.² Because of their insecure status, it is often argued that the citizens who are most likely to feel threatened in this way are those who lack qualifications, skills and steady employment, and who tend to be more pessimistic about the performance of the economy and their finances (Branton and Jones 2005; Fetzer 2000; Scheve and Slaughter 2001). In contrast, a second approach contends that group hostility is motivated by ‘symbolic’ concerns over threats to cultural unity, the values of the native group and established norms and ways of life (Ivarsflaten 2005; Lahav 2004; Sniderman, Hagendoorn and Prior 2004). This latter view is rooted in ‘social identity’ and ‘symbolic politics’ theories, which contend that prejudice also stems from a desire to achieve and maintain a positive and distinct social identity (Sears 1993). Social identity, according to Tajfel (1974: 69) is ‘part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership’. When this identity is perceived to be under threat, individuals express prejudice toward the ‘threatening’ group(s), as part of an attempt to preserve or enhance their positive identity.

Recent research in Europe and the United States provides convincing evidence that it is perceived cultural threat that ultimately trumps economic threat as a driver of prejudice and xenophobic hostility.³ “Britons”, concluded McLaren and Johnson, “are clearly worried about the symbolic threats of immigrants – the threat of religions that are perceived to emphasise non-British values and a terminal community other than that of Britain, and the threat to shared customs and way of life” (p.727). A more recent examination of the British Social Attitudes survey data similarly concludes that while concerns about immigration are elevated among groups more likely to feel economically and culturally threatened by migrants, it is divisions

² On realistic group conflict theory see Blumer (1958) and Bobo (1983).

³ See, for example, John Sides and Jack Citrin, ‘European Opinion About Immigration: The Role of Identities, Interests and Information’, *British Journal of Political Science* 37 (2007), 477-504; Ivarsflaten, ‘Threatened by Diversity’; McLaren and Johnson, ‘Resources, Group Conflict and Symbols’; Schneider, ‘Anti-Immigrant Attitudes in Europe’

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over culture that appear to be larger and growing (Ford, Morrell and Heath 2012). Such findings point to the conclusion that perceived cultural threats have stronger effects on public attitudes (and by extension political behaviour) than economic-based concerns. It appears likely that perceived cultural threat is important to explaining prejudice towards more culturally distinct groups such as Muslim communities of Bangladeshi or Pakistani heritage (see below).

It is important to note recent evidence, however, which suggests that racial prejudice in its classic form and against minority ethnic communities is declining. Research by Ford (2008) points to a significant and steep generational decline in levels of prejudice toward minorities, suggesting we are witnessing the rise of more tolerant attitudes – and more tolerant generations. This suggests that there are clear generational differences in attitudes toward immigration, which *may* over the longer-term lead to a reduction in perceived threats from minority groups, such as immigrants, asylum-seekers and settled British Muslims. It is also important to stress, however, that this process of generational change will be slow, and is distinctly unlikely to lead to large-scale changes within ten years.

3. The Rise, Decline and Fragmentation of the Extreme Right

It is within this broader public opinion context that minor movements on the right-wing of the spectrum have attracted increased support. Reflecting a broader European trend that has seen some extreme right-wing parties enter coalition government (Mudde 2007; Rydgren 2007), in recent years the extreme right BNP has attracted considerable attention after polling increased support.⁴ Despite evidence that overall levels of racial prejudice in Britain are declining (Ford 2008), from 2001 onward the BNP experienced significant growth. Rather than spread across the country, support for the party was concentrated heavily in regions and areas that suffer from disproportionately high rates of economic deprivation and insecurity: the North West of England, West Yorkshire, the Midlands and areas in the outer-east of London.

Consistent with research elsewhere in Europe, studies of extreme right supporters in Britain reveal they share a distinct social profile: middle-aged or elderly working-class men (though especially *skilled* workers); low levels of education and few formal qualifications; pessimistic about their economic prospects; a tendency to read tabloid newspapers that are hostile toward immigrant and minority groups; and based in urban areas characterized by high rates of deprivation, low education levels, large Muslim communities of Bangladeshi or Pakistani origin and over-crowding in the housing market (Ford and Goodwin 2010; see also Biggs and Knauss 2011; Bowyer 2008; see also Goodwin, Ford and Cutts 2012). Identity-related issues are central to explaining support for the extreme right: surveys of self-identified supporters reveal that most are driven foremost by their profound concern over immigration and rising ethnic and cultural diversity. It is important to note, however, that supporters are also extremely dissatisfied with mainstream politics, are more distrustful than average of political elites and are more likely than supporters of other political parties to endorse more crude forms of racial prejudice (Cutts, Ford and Goodwin 2011).

There is also evidence that the extreme right has benefitted electorally from the onset of recession, and which suggests that similar movements may well remain a significant force in British politics over the longer-term. Analysis of the 2010 general election has revealed that the extreme right polled strongest in seats that had experienced the largest increases in unemployment since 2005 (Curtice, Fisher and Ford 2010). However, more detailed qualitative research drawing on extensive interviews with individual supporters suggests that perceived threats to identity – rather than scarce economic resources - are central to explaining support for groups like the BNP (Goodwin 2011). This research suggests that the most strongly committed followers of the extreme right – i.e. the members and activists - tend to exhibit a distinct set of ‘vocabularies of motive’: a strong belief in the perceived threat from immigration but in particular the cultural threat from Muslims and Islam; a tendency to amplify local grievances into a far grander and apocalyptic-style conflict over racial survival; and a sense of moral obligation to take urgent and radical action in order to ‘save’ members of the collective in-group. This finding is mirrored in a comparative study of right-wing extremist members from five West European states, which concludes that supporters are driven foremost by perceptions that their values and cultural identity are threatened by immigration and rising

⁴ It should be noted that these terms are contested within the academic literature. For a comprehensive review of definitions and a classification of the different parties see Carter (2005).

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cultural diversity (Klanderman and Mayer 2005). In summary, therefore, the existing research on support for extreme right parties and public hostility toward immigrants and asylum-seekers more generally (Ivarsflaten 2005) suggest it is perceived threats to culture and values that are of greater importance than perceived threats to economic goods.

4. The Electoral Growth and Potential of the Radical Right

Anchored in a tradition of Euroscepticism, the UK Independence Party emerged out of the anti-Federalist League and is not an ideological member of the extreme right party family. However, recent studies point to significant overlap in the policies and electorates of the extreme right BNP, and the radical right UKIP. At the 2010 general election, UKIP offered citizens a combination of nationalist, xenophobic, Eurosceptic and populist policies. Similar to electorally successful radical right parties in Europe, UKIP demanded an end to mass 'uncontrolled immigration' and pledged to regain border control, expel illegal immigrants, remove benefits for remaining immigrants, repeal the Human Rights Act and 'end the active promotion of the doctrine of multiculturalism by local and national government and all publicly funded bodies' (UKIP 2010). The party also stressed other radical right issues, calling for an end to political correctness, urging citizens to recognise 'the numerous threats to British identity and culture', advocating a ban on the burqa in public buildings and inviting the populist Dutch politician Geert Wilders to show an anti-Islam documentary in the House of Lords.

Aggregate research provides evidence of high correlations between support for UKIP and the extreme right BNP, suggesting both parties have similar social bases of support. John and Margetts (2009: 501; Borisyuk *et al.* 2007) have observed how the BNP and UKIP adopt similar discourses on issues of immigration and national identity, and for this reason media and voters often perceive the two parties to be 'part of the same phenomenon'. This has been supported by subsequent empirical research on the drivers of support for UKIP. One study of UKIP at the 2009 European elections found that while its main driver of support remains Euroscepticism, the party has rallied a wing of working-class supporters who tend to come from Labour-voting backgrounds, are deeply hostile towards immigrants, politically dissatisfied and strikingly similar to supporters of the BNP. These findings led to the conclusion that - for a significant section of the electorate - UKIP may well be seen as a 'polite alternative' to the right-wing extremist BNP (Ford, Goodwin and Cutts 2011). Indeed, the appeal of UKIP among women and also the middle-classes would suggest that the party is better positioned than the toxic extreme right to recruit a broad coalition of voters, though clearly much depends on the outcome of the Eurozone crisis (Ford, Cutts and Goodwin 2011; Goodwin and Evans 2012).

5. The Potential Nature of Identity Change

How might political identities evolve over the next ten years, and is it possible to provide 'guesstimates' of the likelihood of different scenarios? Given that Britain is characterised by a majoritarian first-past-the-post system and comparatively low levels of electoral volatility (Gerring 2005), it is unlikely that a minor party will achieve a major and sustained breakthrough at national level. Minor parties in British politics face other hurdles, not least the absence of mass financial reserves and a tendency to have their electoral prospects weakened by organizational problems that have, at various points, undermined the BNP (Goodwin 2011), Greens (Rudig, Bennie and Franklin 1993) and UKIP (Abedi and Lundberg 2009). Furthermore, some academics have also pointed to the relative openness of the British party system to influence from pressure groups - such as environmental and single-issue groups - which might undermine the longer-term functioning of minor parties that focus on specific issues.

Yet, seen from an alternative and broader perspective, several factors in the wider arena look set to cultivate further opportunities for minor parties over the next ten years. With respect to the Greens, these may include rising public awareness of climate change, the introduction of proportional representation for European Parliament elections; the single-transferable vote system for local elections in Scotland; the opportunities for elected representation that are offered by devolution; a right-wing shift by the Labour Party that has generated a pool of potential support among left-leaning 'old' Labour voters; and, finally, the party's own strategy of targeting local elections as a means of overcoming the barrier of a majority electoral system (Birch 2009). Furthermore, there is evidence of wider and longer-term potential for the Greens. The party's absolute number of votes remains relatively low, but it has been observed that over 27 per cent of respondents to the British Election Study (2005) held favourable views toward the party, indicating 'there is considerable potential for the Greens to increase their vote share, and that they could draw support from a wide spectrum of the population'. Analysis of the characteristics of these potential supporters reveals that they tend to be better-educated and younger citizens, who are often employed in the public sector, are non-religious, subscribe to traditional left-wing values and who often supported the Liberal Democrats at elections (Birch 2009). Given that the Liberal Democrats are now participating in an unpopular coalition government - and in the process have alienated a significant portion of their core base - the Greens may become a 'natural' repository of votes from highly educated and left-liberal citizens who are dissatisfied with Labour at future elections. It is also important not to lose sight of opportunities for radical and extreme left-wing groups. A global financial downturn, the Eurozone crisis, a stubbornly persistent recession in the United Kingdom and bleak economic prospects more generally may enlarge political space for groups anchored in an economic critique of the existing system. Yet while some may point to the outbreak of rioting in England in 2011, and the emergence of the Occupy protest movements, wider evidence of a rise in public support for radical left-wing groups is currently lacking.

Rather, over the next ten years it appears likely that social, economic and political conditions will cultivate further opportunities for parties that seek to amplify and embellish perceptions of economic and/or cultural threat, and hence these opportunities will mainly benefit minor movements on the right-wing of the political spectrum. Enduring public concern over immigration and rising cultural diversity, stubbornly persistent economic inequalities and high levels of political distrust will continue to provide opportunities for movements that combine anti-establishment, anti-immigrant and (increasingly) anti-Muslim appeals. For two specific reasons it appears likely that conditions will become more favourable for these groups. First, a global financial crisis and economic stagnation are likely to underscore risks to individual and

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collective resources, amplifying perceptions of economic threat from immigrant and other minority groups. Past research suggests that intergroup competition over scarce resources increases during periods of economic turmoil, and can lead to a significant rise in group hostility, and even violent expressions of prejudice (Olzak 1992; Brustein 2003).⁵ Second, recent research highlights the important relationship between public attitudes to immigration and levels of political trust. Lauren McLaren (2012) provides evidence that when public concerns over immigration remain unresolved – a scenario that given reduced government control within this area of policy appears likely – the outcome is a more general decline in public trust in the functioning of the political system more broadly. This implies that over the next ten years, continued and unresolved public concern over immigration and closely-related issues - e.g. the presence and perceived compatibility of settled Muslims – may have much broader and negative effects on the overall functioning of the political system.

Meanwhile, within the more immediate arena of party politics another future direction of change concerns the continuing fragmentation and volatility of radical and extreme right-wing politics. Since 2009, and fuelled by the BNP's failed attempt at a breakthrough at the 2010 general election, the extreme right has been characterised by growing internecine rivalry. This is reflected in the emergence of numerous splinter groups, including Britain First (BF), British Freedom (BF) and fringe groups like Democratic Nationalists (DN) and the Britannica Party (BP). Such groups are extremely small, lack resources, tend to be based in specific areas of the country and are highly fragmented. For example, aside from the thirty-year old BNP the 2012 local elections were contested by a total of 149 candidates from alternative radical and extreme right groups.⁶ These included 87 English Democrat candidates that have recruited a significant number of ex-BNP activists and organizers, 38 candidates from the remaining rump of the 1970s NF, six candidates from the BFP that was established in 2010 by disgruntled ex-BNP members, five Democratic Nationalists who exited the BNP following disputes, one candidate from the England First Party that is active in Pendle and one candidate from the BPP which identifies as its 'spiritual leader' Colin Jordan, who in 1962 founded the National Socialist Movement. Over the next ten years, either this fragmentation will continue (which currently appears the most likely scenario) or the increasing number of disparate groups will attempt to forge a coalition (similar to that which led to the formation of the National Front in 1967).

However, it is important to note that the growing number of extreme right groups offer competing ideas about how best to rally public support and embellish grievances that are linked closely to identity-based concerns. Whereas some advocate an electoral 'ballot box' strategy, others favour a 'march-and-grow' approach that employs demonstrations and rallies, for example against 'Asian grooming gangs in Pennine Lancashire, to attract new recruits and publicity. In terms of the latter, the most significant movement is the English Defence League (EDL), a social movement established in June 2009. The EDL claims that it is campaigning 'to protect the inalienable rights of all people to protest against radical Islam's encroachment into the lives of non-Muslims', and is firmly opposed to 'the creeping Islamisation of our country'.

⁵ It is also worth noting findings that trace more extreme manifestations of prejudice – such as violence and lynching – to periods of economic decline, including: Carl I. Hoveland and Robert R. Sears, (1940), 'Minor Studies of Aggression: Correlation of Lynchings with Economic Indices', *Journal of Psychology*, 9, pp.301-10; Stuart E. Tolnay and E.M. Beck (1995) *A Festival of Violence: An Analysis of Southern Lynchings, 1882-1930*, University of Illinois Press.

⁶ The 2012 elections also underscored the lack of unity among extreme right groups, as in Basildon where wards were contested by the BFP, NF, ED and also UKIP.

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Unlike the traditional extreme right, the EDL also claims it is recruiting support 'from people of all races, all faiths, all political persuasions, and all lifestyle choices'. The movement is also seeking to cultivate links with similar groups in other countries, which it views as part of 'the global struggle against Islamic intolerance of Western cultures, customs, religions, politics, and laws'.⁷ Research on the EDL's social bases of support is lacking, although some findings suggest the movement is tapping into broader apathy and discontent with mainstream party options, though particularly among younger and less well educated working class men. One 'Facebook survey' of online EDL supporters suggests that most are young working class men who are more likely than average to experience unemployment and – rather than motivated solely by hostility toward Islam – are driven by broader concerns about immigration and a perception that British national identity is under threat from this process (Bartlett and Littler 2011). Over the next ten years, the EDL or similar groups are likely to continue a provocative and combative strategy of 'march-and grow', while also attempting to forge stronger links with similar groups in Europe (such as the Danish and Norwegian Defence League) and wider 'counter-Jihad' networks that extend into North America and introduce the possibility of more significant financial and logistical support (e.g. Geert Wilders' Party for Freedom in the Netherlands is a benefactor of such resources). It is also likely, however, that the EDL will enter elections, as in May 2012 two of its senior leaders were appointed to the British Freedom Party (BFP) executive council, suggesting the group is likely to contest future local and European elections (that unlike general elections offer more favourable conditions for minor parties).

⁷ EDL Mission Statement. Available online: <http://englishdefenceleague.org/aboutus/missionstatement/> (accessed February 9 2012)

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