Suburban fascism: the far right in twentieth-century Croydon

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Croydon is frequently used as a touchstone for far-right narratives of decline and demographic change. Daniel Frost traces the suburb's deep entanglement with fascism and far-right politics across the twentieth century, and the traditions of resistance that continue to challenge them.

On 6 June 2025, the 'Croydon Extra' Instagram account posted a reel taken from the TikTok of National Front (NF) chairman Tony Martin.[1] Captioned 'National Front reviews Croydon', the reel – which Croydon Extra was posting to condemn – shows Martin walking along London Road, commenting with disgust on shopworkers unloading onions.

Although pathetic, the reel was typical in its attempt to turn Croydon's multicultural high street into a symbol of decline. Will Davies has recently explored the 'Faragist TikTok' genre, where clips suffused with 'anger, suspicion and exhaustion' about the cost of toilet rolls will be followed by others lamenting the popularity of Turkish barbers.[2] Footage of Croydon appears often, frequently accompanied by comments from those that have left. That the borough has problems goes without saying; Croydon Council issued Section 114 bankruptcy notices on three occasions between 2020 and 2022 and appealed to the government for a further bailout earlier this year.[3] But rather than cuts to local government funding, a troubled retail sector, and white-collar deindustrialisation in the town's office district, far-right leaders like Martin denigrate the people that have helped make Croydon one of the most culturally significant parts of London.

Yet to be complaining about onions on TikTok is not a sign of Martin's relevance – having left Croydon in 2022, he was recording a visit to a town where he

presumably, hopefully, feels unwelcome.[4] His move to Belfast had followed that of another far-right leader, Britain First's Jayda Fransen, who first came to attention whilst living in the Croydon suburb of South Norwood.[5] Like the USA's Midwestern industrial suburbs described by Jennifer Hamer and David Roediger, Croydon has been doubly 'abandoned': by capital and the state, and by white people 'unwilling to negotiate what it would take to preserve a livable city' without white supremacy.[6] Whiteness riots hit towns and cities across England and Northern Ireland in August 2024, but they did not come to Croydon. It seems a far cry from the twentieth century, when Croydon was a hub for far-right groups like the British Union of Fascists (BUF), the League of Empire Loyalists (LEL), and the NF at its height in the 1970s. That, as much as a closed-down cinema, is the Croydon which Martin mourns.

This article considers the history of the far right in Croydon over the course of its twentieth-century transformation from an imperial to a multicultural suburb. Once the 'frontline of the colour bar', as the sociologist Les Back described it, Croydon now mainly sees the far right's rearguard.[7] However, given the long entanglement of the far right and the mainstream of British politics, and the violent outbursts which often accompany far-right defeat, this does not mean racism and fascism have been finally repelled – and the struggle against them will have to broaden and intensify if Croydon's convivial communities are to be defended.

Fascism in an imperial suburb

In 1926, uniformed young 'Fascisti' – likely members of the National Fascisti, a small antisemitic group inspired by Mussolini's Italy and focused on street-fighting – assembled outside the headquarters of Croydon's labour movement, Ruskin House, and assaulted two people.[8] A former Mayor of Croydon defended them to the magistrates, having them 'bound over' in return for a promise not to so assemble again.[9] The incident suggested the proximity between Croydon's establishment and 1920s fascism, which the fascist Arnold Leese would disparage as 'Conservatism with knobs on'.[10] This persisted into the 1930s and beyond, as a shared suburban imperialism sutured the Conservatives to fascist critics on their right.

Whiteness was one of the modes in which enthusiasms and worries for British imperialism combined and came home. Bill Schwarz suggested 'the construct of the white man' was in 'abeyance' in public life during the interwar years, 'only residually necessary' during a time when imperial power was relatively secure.[11] This was a period of suburban expansion and attempted imperial retrenchment, and Emily Robinson has highlighted the importance of the mundane made 'awesome' – Barneys tobacco advertised as on sale 'from Croydon to the Cape', for

example – to mid-twentieth-century Conservatism.[12] On the one hand, the 'Tudorbethan' houses and 'bungalows' of Coulsdon or Shirley were as much a product of British imperial identity as Whitehall or South Kensington, and suburbs are still (inaccurately) understood as primarily white.[13] On the other hand, suburban retreat into comfortable domesticity could be the source of anxiety for young white men raised with images of adventure: the BUF propagandist A.K. Chesterton counterposed Rudyard Kipling to suburb-building 'Mrs [Stanley] Baldwin', and the 'settler caste' later inveighed against the 'effete suburbanism' of post-war governments.[14] This combination of imperial security with worry about its 'decadence' was the heady mixture within which the 'Fascisti' were likely formed.

Although the National Fascisti had largely collapsed by the end of the 1920s, with the Croydon branch even besieging their Kensington headquarters over a 1927 financial dispute, fascism retained an appeal in Croydon.[15] In 1933, the antisemitic Conservative MP, Edward Doran, was selected as a Ratepayer council candidate for Croydon's Bensham Manor despite his deselection in Tottenham North.[16] Blackshirt-wearing supporters of Oswald Mosley's New Party fought opponents outside Croydon Town Hall weeks before the BUF was launched in 1932.[17] Though focused on the Midlands and East End, many BUF supporters came from the middle and upper classes in London's suburbs – particularly in the late 1930s, when such membership growth compensated for losses elsewhere.[18] Oswald Mosley visited often, presenting the Sales Cup to South Croydon BUF 'for the greatest progress made in selling Fascist literature' in 1937; North Croydon came third, and Mosley thanked the *Croydon Times* for favourable coverage.[19] His predictions of economic ruin had come to naught, but Mosley was gaining support in the areas of southern England that benefited from the new industries and suburban housebuilding of the 1930s.[20]

In Croydon, new industry clustered around the airport – which made its own contribution to fascist history in 1936 when two British airmen flew to the Canary Islands to take Francisco Franco to Morocco.[21] It also received visits from Nazi women's leader Gertrud Scholtz-Klink and (briefly) Hermann Göring and Joachim von Ribbentrop.[22] However, the airport meant Croydon was heavily bombed in the Second World War, with more V-1 'doodlebugs' than anywhere else in the country, providing a potent local symbol for the nationwide turn against fascism.[23] Post-war fascists were therefore cautious, with a secretive meeting of the 'South-Western Book Club' addressed by Mosley at the Crystal Palace Hotel in 1947, where he teased the creation of the Union Movement (UM).[24] In 1951, UM member John Bean participated in their 'Anti-Peace' raid against a left-wing meeting at Croydon Civic Hall, heckling mention of the Blitz and kicking off the fighting.[25] Most kept a lower profile: in 1947, a drunk fascist told recently-elected Labour MP David Rees-Williams that they were 'biding their time'.[26]

Empire loyalism in a blitzed suburb

The UM was not the only game in town. As headquarters of Imperial Airways, the airport placed the town on the empire's maps, and likely encouraged Chesterton's move to South Croydon – a frequent shuttler between Britain and his South African birthplace.[27] Having broken with Mosley in 1938, he served in East Africa and his play about wartime experiences received glowing reviews when performed at the Croydon Grand in 1953.[28] In 1954 he founded the LEL to pressure the Conservatives from the right, and a Croydon and East Surrey branch formed in 1955.[29] If the LEL benefited from the pre-war strength of fascism and the town's imperial connections, two further features of post-war Croydon were relevant.

Firstly, although the 're-racialisation' of England after 1956 was primarily a response to loss of empire and post-war migration, it often manifested in nervousness about the redevelopment of suburbs and smaller towns.[30] The closure of the airport, announced in 1952 and completed in 1959, was a disconcerting symbol of post-war change, and the Croydon Grand was demolished in the same year.[31] The LEL joined a national campaign for lower taxation with (amongst others) the Croydon Magna Carta Society, formed to resist the 1956 Croydon Corporation Act's provision of the Conservative-controlled council with compulsory purchase powers.[32] Whilst the town centre prospered, its transformation coincided with the growing visibility of Commonwealth migration: the Black feminist Hazel Carby recalled a woman's racist alarm when she picked up wool in Allders department store.[33] As a new Croydon was being born, some feared Croydon's decline.

Secondly, post-war Croydon harboured young men (and some women) whose anxieties about imperial decline were seemingly vindicated by decolonisation. It was a centre for 'teddy boys', often understood as the psychological victims of the Blitz and blamed for violence in Notting Hill in 1958.[34] The LEL recruited from the Young Conservatives, who had a coffee house in Croydon, and interrupted several local meetings against the Suez War.[35] For the most part, though, their efforts were nationally and London-focused, using recruits from Croydon to carry out activism elsewhere.[36] Bean was especially prolific, joining the LEL after a sojourn in the Conservatives – rewarded by Chesterton with a loan to buy a house in Thornton Heath, he reportedly stole the LEL's membership list to found the National Labour Party with John Tyndall in 1957. [37] More committed to violence, in 1960 they merged into the British National Party (BNP) with the Notting Hill-based White Defence League.[38] Croydon does not seem to have held as much interest.

For a start, the LEL had little reason to seriously object to local Conservative MP Fred Harris, who had been accused of 'racial hatred' in 1947 whilst Ratepayer

leader on the council, spent half the year in Kenya and joined the right-wing Suez Group in 1953.[39] Moreover, by the early 1960s, Croydon's youth culture had partly turned against suburban fascism, seeing in Croydon's reconstruction not decline but excitement.[40] When the UM staged a revival in 1962, efforts to meet openly in Croydon were repeatedly rebuffed with a hail of orange peel, eggs and cigarette packets, and the sound of motorcycles and references to the war.[41] Sandwiched between right-wing Conservatism and a vibrant popular antifascism, the LEL's public face turned elsewhere.

Powellism and the National Front in a changing Croydon

Croydon remained a centre for right-wing Conservatism through the 1960s and 1970s, even hosting Ted Heath's Selsdon Park Conference in 1970.[42] It had active branches of the right-wing Monday Club, patronised by Harris' replacement as MP for Croydon North West, Robert Taylor, and they frequently welcomed visits by Enoch Powell.[43] In February 1975, Powell delivered what antifascist magazine *Searchlight* labelled 'his worst speech in years' to Surrey's Monday Clubs, calling for repatriation.[44] If the venues he visited – the Greyhound Hotel, the Top Rank Suite, the Fairfield Halls – were products of the town's reconstruction and arguably emblematic of his break with nostalgic empire loyalism, his politics were targeted against its growing Black and Asian population, as a popular site of 'secondary settlement'.[45] Taylor put the position bluntly in a parliamentary debate in 1976: 'The area which I represent does not wish to be like Southall, which is synonymous with the Asian community.'[46]

Croydon's first Asian councillor, Amrit Devesar, was elected in the Thornton Heath ward of Bensham Manor in 1971.[47] He had the misfortune to represent the headquarters of the NF, founded in 1967 by the BNP and LEL: Bean and Chesterton had reconciled at the latter's flat, and by 1972, funded by Croydon antique dealer Gordon Brown, new chairman Tyndall had moved their headquarters into 50 Pawsons Road, opposite the cemetery.[48] As a newspaper quipped in 1974, many wished the NF would 'roll all its members in a shroud and bury the lot across the road.'[49] The local NF grew in symbiosis with Powellism, appearing (uninvited) outside his Croydon meetings as a sort of guard.[50] It experienced modest electoral growth, breaching 1000 votes in Croydon North West in October 1974. Like his Labour wardmates, Devesar lost to the Conservatives in the May elections that year; the local NF did not contest them.

50 Pawsons Road was more than just a headquarters: in addition to a small printing business, it had bedrooms for staff members and fascists passing through London. It was therefore pivotal in faction fights. Having pushed Chesterton to resign in 1970, Bean was marginalised by Tyndall and Martin Webster, making his 'white flight' to Suffolk.[51] However, Tyndall and Webster

soon lost ground to 'populists' around John Kingsley Read, who became chairman in 1974 with support from ex-Conservatives eager for electoral success.[52] The two launched a brief occupation of Pawsons Road in 1975, and Brown convened a meeting at East Croydon's Cherry Orchard to plot their expulsion.[53] Re-admitted after a legal decision, Tyndall took back control in 1976 as Kingsley Read formed the National Party (NP).[54] Pawsons Road passed to the NP, meaning spells in Teddington and Hackney for the NF – the latter being, in any case, more central to traditional East London recruiting grounds. In Croydon, the NF and NP split an already modest vote in the 1977 Greater London Council elections, and the NP declined nationally. When a further split by the Constitutional Movement took control of the Hackney offices, Pawsons Road seems to have reverted to the NF.[55]

Taylor died in 1981, and the subsequent by-election was contested by the Constitutional Movement, the perennial Bill Boaks as a 'White Resident' and, for the NF, a young Nick Griffin. It was a surprise victory for the Liberals' Bill Pitt, his margin exceeding the combined votes of the far right. Though no leftist, Pitt had left the Young Conservatives in opposition to apartheid and became vice-chairman of the Joint Committee Against Racialism. Here was an indication Croydon was changing and a sign of the NF's marginality, even if Margaret Thatcher's victory in 1979 came partly on the back of an appeal to Powellism in places like Croydon.[56] However, electoralism was only ever part of the NF's presence – always accompanied by violence targeting Black and Asian communities, LGBT people, and the organised left. This intensified with the rise of Griffin's 'Political Soldier' faction in the 1980s, a syncretic 'Third Position' tendency that prioritised fanatical loyalty and racial separatism over electoral campaigns.

The far right in a multicultural suburb

The by-election was arguably not the most important event in Croydon in 1981. On 1 June, a group of Black young people stormed into the Wilton Arms on Thornton Heath's high street. They were seeking out NF supporters known to drink there, a few streets from Pawsons Road.[57] After being repulsed, the group ran into white teenager Terry May, dragging him from his motorcycle; stabbed repeatedly, he died before reaching hospital.[58] May had no links to the NF, and his death was tragic. In the 'Croydon 15' defence trial that followed, however, local activists compiled evidence of the violent 'siege' that faced local Black and Asian residents, and which motivated the Wilton Arms attack.[59]

Violence had always been part of the NF's lexicon: in 1978, a local council candidate told gay activists that he supported 'the total extermination of them from the face of the earth.'[60] After 1980, Griffin marginalised Tyndall and then Webster, turning Pawsons Road into a 'hotbed for young nationalists from

around the country' – and making an effort to recruit from 'the ruffians and hooligans' on local estates.[61] *Searchlight* reported an attack on Ruskin House in 1980, and an NF march from outlying New Addington in February 1981; a picture sent to a local newspaper showed youths in 'Klan gear' in front of a burning cross.[62] A bulletin produced by the 'Friends and Family of the Croydon 15' claimed Wilton Arms drinkers shouted 'Sieg Heil' at passing Black people, and that a girl had been attacked outside another nearby pub 'by a gang of about 50 whites' on 31 May, the night before the May killing.[63]

At the same time, the NF was becoming increasingly eccentric and fractious. As informant Matthew Collins put it, Pawsons Road now had 'a mattress on the floor so that tired/stoned/amorous young revolutionaries could "relax" after a busy day writing drunken letters to local newspapers praising Colonel Gaddafi.'[64] If Griffin's 'Political Soldiers' were bizarre, NF traditionalists remained frightening: in 1985, an 'Ulster NF' member moved into Pawsons Road, and by 1986 had been charged with assault.[65] The same year, Griffin decamped from Croydon to 'rural East Anglia' and the NF split into two.[66] Part of the Croydon branch aligned with Griffin against the traditionalist 'Flag' group, with the two squabbling to the local press.[67] The former dissolved themselves in 1989, emphasising disinterest in elections.[68] Meanwhile, the 'Flag' NF launched a recruitment drive, hoping to 'put a more intelligent, more socially acceptable gloss' on their image by leafleting the private Whitgift School.[69]

The early 1990s saw Tyndall's new BNP form a Croydon branch, with quarterly *The Rune* edited by Griffin from 1994; he was later prosecuted for distributing material likely to incite racial hatred.[70] Croydon had far-right bands like Sudden Impact (also known as the Croydon Criminals), and a leader of BNP-linked paramilitaries Combat 18 lived in Thornton Heath.[71] Unsurprisingly, violence increased. In 1992, Anti-Fascist Action reported on a St. George's Day attack on two gay men by NF-supporting skinheads.[72] Then, on 31 July, 24-year-old Afghan refugee Ruhullah Aramesh was beaten in Thornton Heath after trying to protect his female relatives from harassment. He died in hospital two days later. In the aftermath, a BNP sticker was put up outside his family home; after drawing attention to the prevalence of racist violence, the Croydon Race Equality Council offices were plastered with 'posters recalling the old Nazi anthem "Tomorrow Belongs to Me"', a song from *Cabaret* appropriated by fascists in the 1970s.[73] Protest marches were organised in September 1992 (by the Anti-Nazi League) and June 1993 (by the Anti-Racist Alliance), with the latter attracting up to 6000 anti-racists.[74]

However, violence was not just the product of the far right. The period had seen hardening attitudes towards refugees across Europe and North America and restrictive policies on immigration.[75] During the first Gulf War, the Home Office issued deportation orders to some Arabs resident in Britain, including a

Palestinian couple living in Croydon.[76] In November 1992, an anti-racist group protested outside the Home Office's Croydon headquarters, linking Aramesh's death to the government's Asylum Bill.[77] Yet whilst the local press was, as Nigel Copsey has suggested, fairly steadfast in opposing far-right groups, it nevertheless reproduced anti-refugee rhetoric.[78] Thus in 1997, although repudiating the BNP-breakaway Surrey Border Front, the *Croydon Advertiser* fretted about 'asylum seekers who are flooding into the area from abroad in unprecedented numbers.'[79] If there was always opposition to the far-right and the government alike from within Croydon's diverse communities, therefore, the Croydon establishment was suburban multiculturalism's unreliable defender.

Conclusion

It was noted in the introduction that the far right did not come to Croydon in August 2024. This article has followed the shifting relationship of the far right to Croydon through the twentieth century: from a place to which fascists were drawn in the interwar period, through the immediate post-war period where they lived in Croydon but did not publicly organise, into the 1970s and 1980s when Croydon became their target. In the 1990s, far-right organisations slipped towards the background whilst violence continued; the late 2000s and 2010s saw Croydon come back into their crosshairs, with more than 20% of the vote for the BNP in the New Addington wards in 2006 and regular far-right protests outside the Home Office. By 2021, though, outnumbered by antifascists in recent years, they brought along just 10 people.[80] No wonder they didn't bother in 2024.

However, Croydon still saw disturbances. On 7 August, after rumours circulated on social media that the far right would appear, 50 young people marched along North End to London Road. As they reached the mosque, intending to defend it, they were confronted by police; bottles and fireworks were thrown, and 10 people were arrested. A news website described it as 'the only real blot' on a night of antifascist rallies.[81] Given the history described in this article, the young people's caution is understandable: in 2017, the Kurdish-Iranian asylum seeker Reker Ahmed was put into a coma by a group in Shirley; in 2018, a South Norwood property developer filmed himself burning an effigy of Grenfell Tower; in 2021, an Eritrean refugee was blinded in an acid attack in Thornton Heath.[82] Muslim community centres in Thornton Heath and South Norwood were targeted with 'remigration' graffiti in January 2025.[83] As Les Back noted in 2002, 'Suburban racism remained while Croydon has become a more culturally diverse place.'[84]

But this article has argued that the far right in Croydon cannot be understood in isolation. Throughout the twentieth century, the organised far right moved in parallel (and sometimes overlapped) with parts of the Croydon establishment.

Today, a Conservative councillor is a recent former member of the Democrats and Veterans Party, described as 'a far-right, Trump-esque splinter group with an unapologetic anti-Muslim stance'.[85] Meanwhile, local MP Chris Philp shares far-right dog-whistles about 'two-tier policing'.[86] Nor is it just the Conservatives: Labour, with a leader advised by Morgan McSweeney and the 'Croydon Clique', briefed about 'white working class areas like Croydon' to justify its shift to the right.[87] It suits the forces that are abandoning Croydon for the town's problems be blamed on 'strangers'.[88]

The organised far right is maintained by networks of individuals, and this article has highlighted the importance of specific leaders, funders and headquarters in Croydon in enabling them to fester. I do not know exactly which combination of those pulled Martin into the NF. I do know that the hate represented by his TikTok reel was not born of them alone: it is a popular declinist account of Croydon that identifies its problems with its convivial communities. This is an account that must be challenged – not by denying the extent of problems in Croydon, where the 2021 Regina Road scandal exposed the racism of a moulder-ing housing system, but by providing alternatives to the forces of abandonment.[89]

The forces for this fight lie within Croydon's convivial communities themselves, from groups organising against racist policing and deportations to community kitchens nurturing solidarity through food. If the August 2024 march repre-sented an 'antifascist victory', as the Liberation Movement has suggested, it is because the struggle against fascism cannot be limited to the struggle against the organised far right.[90] It must, as many in Croydon already understand, be a struggle against the far right and the British state alike: a struggle to remake Croydon on our own terms.

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