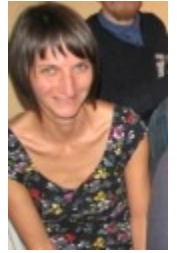


## When is a kettle not a kettle? When it is on slow boil...

*For the past few months, [Hilary Pilkington](#) (University of Manchester) has been attending demonstrations and other events organised by the English Defence League (EDL) as part of ethnographic research conducted for the [MYPLACE](#) project. Travelling with members of the organisation (who are aware of their status as researchers) to these events has allowed project members to experience demonstrations from the perspective of EDL members themselves. This article documents the policing of a particular EDL demonstration that might be experienced by members of a wide range of organisations.*



### When is a kettle [1] not a kettle? When it is on slow boil...

On 1 September the EDL conducted a legally sanctioned demonstration in Walthamstow, East London (see [here](#) for details of the aims of the demonstration set out by the EDL). It was roundly declared by demonstrators to be 'the worst demo ever'. It is not hard to understand why: demonstrators never reached the final rendezvous point where speeches by EDL leaders were meant to take place; they were on the receiving end of a barrage of eggs thrown by counter-demonstrators; they were kept within a tight police containment cordon from approximately 12.30 to 10pm; and, before finally being released, they were arrested en masse under Section 60 of the Criminal Justice Act (breach of peace), regardless of whether there was any evidence that individuals had participated in, or were likely to participate in, any public order offence.

The purpose of this blog is not to debate the rights or wrongs of EDL views or policies but to describe the experience of being on that demonstration from a participant's perspective and raise questions about whether police strategy was, in this instance, warranted.

The first indication that this was going to be a demonstration with a difference was when the usual police escort into the initial 'muster' place as EDL coaches approach the city of demonstration did not materialise. Instead two coaches of EDL demonstrators offloaded their contents at King's Cross station with no police presence and no knowledge of whether counter demonstrators were waiting. Fortunately (but it appeared to be luck rather than planning on the part of the police) demonstrators were picked up from the station front by EDL stewards and guided towards the designated pub (where the police were in attendance) without violent incident. Around 12.30 the police began to move the demonstrators towards the start point of the march – this involved taking them back to Kings Cross and escorting them on a packed and claustrophobic tube train half a dozen stops down the line to Blackhorse Road, maximizing disruption to public transport and other passengers.



Demonstrators being escorted onto the tube at Kings Cross

Demonstrators were contained outside Blackhorse Rd tube station for a while after which they began 'the long march' to Waltham Forest Magistrates court. Because of the endless stops while the police tried to clear counter demonstrators from the sanctioned route and, when this proved impossible, the EDL march was re-routed, this relatively short journey took around two hours. This process (already now lasting around three hours) is reminiscent of what has been referred to as a 'mobile kettle'. But the frustration was only about to begin. The demonstrators (media reports have varied in their estimates of EDL demonstrators from 200-500 but based on previous demonstrations, we would estimate there were

500-600) were then fully kettled for a further two hours, in full view of the final destination (where the rally was meant to take place) and of the counter demonstration, which had effectively prevented the EDL rally taking place. Police vans and a solid police cordon prevented any movement outside a contained area while police with dogs patrolled the grassy area that lay between EDL demonstrators and their final destination. As is clear from the photo below, throughout this period of containment demonstrators were videoed by the police.

It was at this point that the mood began to become agitated. Despite the total lack of information, as time ticked on it was clear that the speeches that the demonstrators had come to hear would not take place. Periodically small groups of demonstrators hatched plans to 'break out' of the kettle area and, when they attempted this, scuffles broke out with the police. As rumours spread that the EDL leadership had abandoned the attempt to hold the rally and been escorted away, the mood grew despondent. It was now around 5 hours since anybody had had access to water, food or toilets and frustration rose. The 'long march' back began...

If anything counter demonstrators were more effective on the return march – splitting into small groups and now armed with eggs and other missiles, they moved from side street to side street causing the police to slow the 'mobile kettle' to a halt while, with riot helmets donned, they cleared the next street. Around an hour or so later, demonstrators were back at Blackhorse Road station where, it had been promised, the coaches they had come to London would be waiting to take them out of the city.

That was the last, and erroneous, piece of information that demonstrators received until around 8.30pm. Then, suddenly, after two hours of questions about 'what is happening' had been met with a uniform 'we don't know' from police officers on the ground, somebody, somewhere managed to persuade a police officer to tell us that the Commander in charge had ordered that all demonstrators would be arrested under Section 60 of the Criminal Justice Act (breach of peace). As protests went up about the justification of this, demonstrators were told that this was 'in your interest' as it allowed the police to remove people from the area and thus 'prevent' further breach of peace. At this point a number of us did point out to the police officers on the ground that the coaches that had brought us to London were parked 50 metres away and, if just some of the officers containing us in the area were released to escort demonstrators to their right coaches, they could achieve the same aim without causing themselves a significant amount of paperwork and demonstrators another two hours of discomfort. The response, understandably, was that this was 'not our decision'. So, there then began a very, very long process of the search and arrest of each individual protestor (taken out in twos). In the course of this process, a few dozen bottles of water were thrown into the crowd and shared by those who caught them. It would be another couple of hours (making it 10 or more in total) before anybody would see food or a toilet.

After we had all been read our rights, told what we had



Demonstrators are 'contained' close to Waltham Forest Magistrates Court

After we had all been read our rights, told what we had been arrested for, searched and given a copy of our arrest docket, we were transported with our arresting officers to the other end of London (the coaches by this time had been told to leave) and left to find some way back to wherever we had come from. Before we left the bus, we were told that we were 'no longer under arrest'; a police officer's word, I guess, has to be trusted....

This is not a blog about the EDL. It does not seek to portray them as victims (nor as criminals). But anybody knows that if you put a kettle on slow boil for ten hours, it will run dry, and when it does, it will explode. Given the experience of demonstrators, who came to a legally sanctioned demonstration and behaved peaceably [2], and were subjected to containment in a 'mobile kettle' for ten hours without access to water, food or toilets, it is, in fact, remarkable that no serious violence took place at Walthamstow. At the bitter end, many demonstrators declared that they would 'never again' attend a demonstration. Before you conclude that this is a 'victory' for police strategy, consider whether you would have the same reaction if the demonstration had not been organised by the EDL?



The remains of the march: a scene from the final kettle

[1] The term 'kettle' or 'kettling' refers to a police strategy of surrounding demonstrators at a protest in order to contain them in a particular place. The police argue it is necessary as a preventative measure to avoid violence or disorder during demonstrations, but it is increasingly being used for long periods of time and protest groups have argued that it is deployed to deliberately frustrate demonstrators or as a means of ascertaining personal details and photographs of protestors.

[2] There were 20 arrests for offences other than the 'breach of peace' arrest imposed on all participants, of which only 9 were EDL demonstrators (others were involved in the counter demonstration) and primarily for possession of drugs, fireworks etc.

**This article was first published on the [MYPLACE blog](#).**

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

### About the author

**Hilary Pilkington** is Professor of Sociology at the University of Manchester. She has researched and published widely on late and post-Soviet Russian youth practices. She is coordinator of a major EC funded FP7 project – 'MYPLACE' – investigating youth and civic engagement (2011-15) in the context of diverse political heritage and the receptivity of young people in Europe to populist political agendas (<http://www.fp7-myplace.eu/>).

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