

## The police commissioner elections offer a lifeline to the beleaguered far right

*In this post the **Extremis Project UK team** raise important questions about the potential gains which could be made by extremist parties in an election likely to be characterized by pervasive voter apathy. At a time of fragmentation within Britain's far right, could success in the police commissioner elections act as a unifying force?*

With the first ever Police and Crime Commissioner Elections fast approaching, it appears the planned democratisation of the police in England and Wales has failed to catch the public's imagination. With the stated purpose being to reconnect the public with the police, it currently looks as though apathy could undermine the project from the very beginning. Forty-one of the forty-three police forces are electing new commissioners on November 15th, and polling stations look set to be derelict. The Electoral Reform Society anticipate a [record low](#) turnout, falling well below 20%, with others fearing lows of 10% in some areas.

The new commissioners will have sweeping powers to set local police budgets and priorities, and hold chief constables to account. They are also *crime* commissioners, so are tasked with improving the criminal justice system as a whole in their area, including for example child protection and the courts. When the coalition first mooted the plan, they spoke of independent candidates with a sense of public duty, reassuring the public that policing would not be politicised. Yet all the main political parties are fielding candidates, and if the turnout is as low as many predict the likelihood of extremist and far-right parties gaining an otherwise unobtainable electoral success will greatly be increased.

Because with apathy comes [opportunity](#).

The margin for victory will potentially be so small, a determined campaign by an extremist candidate, which resulted in their core vote turning out, could prove fruitful. While the nominations are [not yet closed](#), it currently looks as though the British National Party (BNP), the UK's most successful far right party, has [decided against](#) widespread [engagement](#) with the elections, and is undertaking a survey of its members to decide whether or not it stands and puts forward the required £5,000 deposits.

But two extremist parties are making a concerted effort to contest the elections: the English Democrats (EDP) and British Freedom Party (BFP). The English Democrat Party is not a traditional far right party but the internal fighting in the BNP has seen a significant number of former BNP activists join their ranks. In the 2012 local elections [43%](#) of their 87 candidates were ex-BNP members. Currently, with only one elected Mayor in Doncaster and fewer than 10 councillors across England, the English Democrat leader Robin Tilbrook is targeting the commissioner elections in Essex in an attempt to add to their limited electoral success to date.

However, the most high profile and serious chance of extremist success at the upcoming elections comes in Bedfordshire, from Kevin Carroll of the British Freedom Party. Led by Paul Weston, a former UK Independence Party candidate, the BFP have formed an alliance with the English Defence League, a counter-jihad street movement. However, the EDL's leader, Tommy Robinson, last Thursday [resigned](#) as deputy leader of the BFP. It is possible that with several impending court cases Robinsons' decision was motivated by a desire to detoxify the BFP/EDL link and put distance between his criminal reputation and Kevin Carrolls attempt to become a Police and Crime Commissioner.

The Bedfordshire constituency that Kevin Carroll is contesting includes Luton, both his hometown and the birthplace of the EDL. Much of the group's support is based in the region and unlike in other parts of the UK where the EDL brand might not be as familiar, they possess a high public profile in this area. Having already started an energetic and well-funded campaign with high quality [campaign material](#), the EDL/BFP

are pushing hard to make the most of this opportunity. Should the turnout be as low as expected, and if Carroll and the British Freedom Party manage to turnout their core support in the area, they have an outside chance of victory. As such, Bedfordshire will no doubt be the litmus test for extremist success at the police commissioner elections.

At a time when Britain's far right is [fragmenting](#) amidst volatile internal schisms, often fostered by frustration at the movement's lack of progress during a period of economic turmoil, the ability for the police commissioner elections to provide the beleaguered far right with a lifeline has not gone unnoticed. [Commentators](#), [campaigners](#), and even current [chief constables](#) have raised their concerns. Unsurprisingly, [HOPE not hate](#), the nationwide anti-fascism campaign, has begun mobilizing its supporters for a targeted campaign primarily focusing on the EDL's deputy leader, Kevin Carroll.

Drawing on the evidence that emerged in their [Fear and Hope Report](#), which showed that political violence is strongly opposed by the vast majority of society, HOPE not hate intend to distribute 50,000 newspapers in Bedfordshire that expose what they believe to be the real and often violent nature of the EDL. Targeted evidence-based campaigning such as this could well influence events and serve to counter some of the advantages gained by extremists from the likely low turnout.

In addition to the concern expressed by the anti-fascist movement at the possibility of a British Freedom Party breakthrough, Nick Griffin, leader of the more popular BNP, has clearly been rattled by the plans of the rival party. Following the BNP's [electoral collapse](#) over the last few years a power vacuum has emerged on the radical right. Judging by the increasingly hostile and bitter [attacks](#) directed against the EDL and its leader Tommy Robinson, Griffin seems to be deeply concerned that electoral success for the EDL/BFP, possibly in the police commissioner elections, could serve as a springboard and provide the impetus necessary to threaten the BNP's hegemonic position on the far right. In reality the British Freedom Party have as yet shown few signs that they are a serious rival and lack the brand awareness enjoyed by the BNP.

It is clear that much of the concern over the ability of extremist parties to exploit a low turnout and gain disproportionate power is justified. However, recent polling by [YouGov for the Extremis Project](#) on public attitudes to the English Defence League, does perhaps indicate that when predicting the chances of success for Kevin Carroll in the Bedfordshire elections, caution is required.

Despite the likely paltry turnout the odds remain heavily stacked against electoral success for those connected to the EDL. Only 33% of those polled by YouGov had heard of the EDL and claimed to know exactly what they stand for. Of those aware of their existence an overwhelming number, 85%, would never join. Some of these people may consider voting for an EDL/BFP candidate, perhaps as a protest vote, despite their reluctance to actively join the group. However, 69% of those who were aware of what the EDL stood for do not agree with their values or methods. Hence, the key findings of the [Extremis Project](#) data make bleak reading for those hopeful of an EDL/BFP breakthrough at the elections.

Whether or not Kevin Carroll succeeds, placing such significant control over crime, law and order in the hands of someone with a paltry public mandate could paradoxically undermine democratic confidence. While England and Wales are likely to escape a far-right Police and Crime Commissioner this time around, the new system offers an opportunity for marginal extremist parties to seize power that would ordinarily be unobtainable.

**This article was first published on the Extremis Project's [website](#)**

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