Castells (2012: 14) argues that anxiety is a response to an external threat over which the threatened person has no control. Anxiety leads to fear, and has a paralyzing effect on action. However, anxiety can be overcome and lead to action if it develops into anger, usually through the perception of an unjust action and the identification of the agent responsible for it. In the previous chapter, the anxieties held by EDL supporters about Islam, and about Muslims, were detailed. It was shown how these anxieties construct a threatening ‘other’ that compounds and reinforces anti-Muslim and anti-Islam sentiments in wider society. It was argued, however, that the empowered subject of ‘othering’ assumed in existing models of Islamophobia needs rethinking in the light of how anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim sentiments emerge in individuals’ narratives as a feeling of themselves being the object of ‘othering’. In this sense anti-Islam or anti-Muslim sentiment is as much a narrative of ‘self’ as ‘other’. In this chapter, attention turns to the exploration of the most consistent and emotionally charged narrative of ‘self’ identified in this study; that of ‘second-class citizen’.

Urban deprivation manifests itself not only in poverty but also community fragmentation, loss of meaning and the fracturing of individuals’ sense of self (McDonald, 2014: 4–5). In that context, justice is understood as equality and its violation as inequality whose intimate experience may take the form of resignation, shame and fear but also resentment and resistance (2014: 4–5). Among respondents in this study there was a universal perception that the needs of others were privileged over their own. While the perceived beneficiary of that injustice might be racialised (as ‘immigrants’ or ‘Muslims’), the agent responsible for this injustice is understood to be a weak-willed or frightened government that panders to the demands of a minority for fear of being labelled racist.

In the first part of this chapter, expressions of resentment and injustice and its links to class and racialised identities are traced through the literature on the backlash to multiculturalism in the UK. This is followed by a detailed exploration of accounts of respondents’ experience of injustice and the ‘preferential treatment’ afforded to ethnic minorities in terms of access to benefits, housing and jobs. The third section considers the perceived institutionalisation of this injustice through a ‘two-tier’ justice system, which, respondents claim, allows ‘them’ to get
away with things and fails to protect or recognise injustices towards ‘us’. Finally, EDL activism is analysed as a mechanism for resisting this perceived second-class citizen status. How this is accomplished through a discursive reordering of privilege and prejudice – in which ‘we’ are seen as the discriminated and those in power are dismissed as liberal elite ‘do-gooders’ who have little understanding of the everyday worlds they inhabit – is discussed here. In Chapters 7 and 8, attention turns to the more tangible practices of resistance in strategies of being seen (‘standing together’) and being heard (‘getting your message across’).

Whiteness, class and the backlash to multiculturalism

The views of EDL activists can be broadly situated within the series of backlashes against multicultural politics that have taken place in the UK in recent decades (Busher, 2013: 72). ‘Multiculturalism’ was promoted in many countries in the last quarter of the twentieth century as a proactive policy to recognise and realise the positive social and cultural impact of interaction and communication between diverse ‘cultural’ communities (defined, usually, as ‘ethnic minorities’) alongside legislative and educational measures to expose the ‘scientific’ underpinnings of racism as erroneous and protect individuals against racist acts that had characterised initial Western, post-imperial attempts to combat ethnic and racial intolerance. Multiculturalism has ensured that post-war migrants, arriving as citizens of the United Kingdom and Commonwealth, have been recognised as ethnic and racial minorities requiring state support and differential treatment to overcome barriers to their exercise of citizenship (Meer and Modood, 2014: 658–59), while ‘multicultural citizenship’ provides an antidote to the cultural assimilation traditionally demanded of migrants and minorities (including religious minorities) by nation states (Modood, 2013: 2).

‘Multiculturalism’ has been criticised, from an academic perspective, for both being too radical and for being not radical enough. The former criticism suggests that multiculturalism equates cultural diversity with cultural relativism, while the latter accuses multiculturalism of failing to eliminate the implicit hierarchies of biologically rooted racial doctrines in favour of cosmetically replacing the uncomfortable notion of ‘race’ with that of ‘culture’ or ‘identity’ (Lentin, 2004: 98). The replacement of the language of race and racism by that of ‘different but equal’ culture, Lentin (2014: 1275–76) argues, has obscured the experience of racism and reduced the struggle for equality and justice to a fight for the recognition of cultural identity.

From a political perspective, in the post-9/11 context, multiculturalism is increasingly interpreted as ‘part of the problem not the solution’ (Kundnani, 2004: 108) to racism and ethnic discrimination. In this understanding the ‘problem’ is not inequality or deprivation of ‘minority’ communities but self-imposed cultural barriers between communities that hinder the full participation in British society of ethnic minorities and foster racism (Kundnani, 2004: 108; Abbas and Akhtar, 2005: 134). To its critics, therefore, multiculturalism constitutes a practice of excessive tolerance and benevolence towards disloyal, unassimilable, culturally
different others and has been blamed by leading European politicians for a range of sociopolitical problems including crime, terrorism and urban segregation (Lentin, 2014: 1272–73). This thinking is epitomised in the Blair government’s adoption of ‘community cohesion’ as a new social priority in the wake of the 2001 ‘race riots’ in Burnley, Bradford and Oldham while, more recently (February 2011), David Cameron (cited in Meer and Modood, 2014: 659) claimed that ‘the doctrine of “state multiculturalism” has encouraged culturally different people to live apart from one another and apart from the mainstream’.

The backlash to multiculturalism in the UK has deeper roots, however, and is bound up in tensions between the politics of class and the politics of anti-racism. Viewing Labour-controlled local authorities as a potential site of resistance to the newly elected Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher (1979), the Labour Party initiated the creation of a structure of equalities-related posts within local government and anti-racist policies and racism-awareness training, which generated resentment among local authority staff whilst feeding central government and right-wing media attacks on local government multicultural and anti-racist initiatives (Hewitt, 2005: 30–32). This led, Hewitt (2005: 33) argues, to a growing disconnect between Labour and the concerns of the white working class (particularly in areas bordering on racially mixed communities) who, at a time of a rapidly widening gulf between the rich and the poor, ‘felt themselves to be unheard and neglected by the local politicians they would once have looked to for support’.

This problem reflected a wider failure to connect issues of racism and class rather than set them in unhelpful competition with one another. This is evident also in early sociological writing on race in the UK where migrant workers are seen either as an ‘underclass’ outside of the working class in the employment of the ‘race relations’ problem (Rex, 2000: 179) or, alternatively, ‘race’ is rejected as no more than a mask which hides real economic relationships (Miles, 2000: 195) and racial differentiations are seen as taking place always in the context of class differentiations (Meer and Nayak, 2013: 8). Thus, through the 1980s, Hewitt (2005: 33) argues, real concerns that made some whites receptive to the interpretations of racist political groups ‘frequently went unanswered or were dismissed as racist talk’, resulting, by the 1990s, in white working-class backlash to equalities policies (2005: 34).

Today, multiculturalism is challenged by critiques from the right and left alike (Hewitt, 2005: 151; Bygnes, 2012; Meer and Modood, 2014). This, Hewitt suggests, is not due to a problem with the philosophy of multiculturalism per se but the everyday management of its politics such that local authorities have come to be perceived as promoting a special interest group ‘against the will of a victim white community’ (2005: 152). This is identified by Lone and Silver (2014: 177–78) in their study of the white working-class community of Higher Blackley (Manchester) where residents felt things had become palpably worse for working-class communities in recent years, while local politicians had failed to address the issues that mattered to them and took their support for granted.

Recognising the entwinement of class and race/ethnicity in patterns of contemporary inequality and marginalisation is central to understanding the context
of activism in movements such as the EDL. Wacquant (2008: 163) suggests contemporary forms of ‘advanced marginality’ (in western Europe and North America) are not explained by a single dynamic but by ‘two closely interwoven trends’: the unexpected resurgence of a range of inequalities and the crystallisation of novel forms of socio-economic marginality widely perceived to have an ‘ethnic’ component; and the spread of racialising ideologies and xenophobic tensions as a result of the simultaneous increase in persistent unemployment and the permanent settlement of immigrant populations (2008: 163). While differently construed in each context, politics – state structures and policies – always plays a decisive role in how inequalities of class, place and origin are woven together, while the reticence of governments to address the accumulation of economic hardship, social dissolution and cultural dishonour gives rise to civic alienation and chronic unrest capable of challenging the institution of citizenship itself (2008: 5–7). Indeed, the Lone and Silver (2014: 181) study noted above, found a marked decline in democratic engagement and participation and a cultural divide between white working-class communities and the socially liberal world of individuals and institutions in positions of power (termed the ‘do-gooders’). This lack of trust in public institutions, they argue, is, in large part, the cause of decreasing social cohesion since a perception that such institutions favour immigrants over the majority population often stems from a lack of transparency in the decision-making process and a concomitant tendency to believe things heard through public conversation. This widens the opportunities for populist parties to enter the debate with simpler messages that resonate with certain issues and anxieties, thereby creating further tensions in the community (2014: 181).

How this works in a particular spatial and historical context is analysed in Rhodes’s (2011) exploration of working-class support for the far right in the Lancashire town of Burnley. On the back of the urban disturbances (labelled ‘race riots’) in the town over the summer of 2001, the BNP gained three councillors during the 2002 local elections and went on to win 10 per cent of the vote in the town in the General Election of 2005 (Goodwin, 2011a: 11, 71). Exploring the reasons for this support, Rhodes demonstrates how, in conditions of high deprivation,1 local council resource allocation came to be understood as unfairly skewed to the benefit of areas of the town which were ‘predominantly “Asian”’, leaving the town’s ‘white’ areas neglected (Rhodes, 2011: 108). At one level, this is a classic manifestation of the ‘white backlash’ towards policies aimed at equality and the promotion of multiculturalism discussed above; BNP voters constructed what was interchangeably termed ‘the “Asian”/Pakistani/Muslim’ population as a group undeserving of local government resources since, it was imagined, they refused to adhere to the dominant values of British society, engaged in criminal activity and ‘benefit-scrounging’, and represented a material, political and cultural threat to locality and nation (2011: 108). However, Rhodes warns against seeing this as solely an issue of the scapegoating of ethnic communities by an undifferentiated ‘white working class’ since BNP voters not only distanced themselves from ethnic and racial ‘others’, but also from those ‘poor’ whites – single mothers, drug
addicts, welfare-dependent ‘dossers’ and ‘alkies’ – whose entitlement to resources was viewed by the more affluent BNP voters as equally unmerited.

White working-class resentment is often cited as an explanation for racist or anti-social attitudes and represented as an unfortunate but inevitable outcome of inequality and injustice frequently related to the proclaimed failure of multiculturalism (Ware, 2008: 2). Ware argues that since such resentment towards immigration is often found among the poorest sections of the population (and compounded by fear and insecurity as a result of rapid economic and social change) policy-makers feel compelled to respond with understanding and ‘manifest fairness’ (2008: 3). In fact, she suggests, resentment is rarely alleviated by removing the source of the grievance, since it often involves ‘a kind of pleasure inherent in self-pity or victimhood’ and thus does not necessarily expect or want a remedy (2008: 11). The construction of economic migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers as the undeserving beneficiaries of social resources, claiming and receiving welfare entitlements at the expense of majority (‘indigenous’) populations, in fact reflects a ‘paranoia’ – a pathological form of fear based on a conception of the self as excessively fragile, and constantly threatened – on the part of the ‘native’, ‘indigenous’ and white population about the potential loss of Europeanness or whiteness and of the lifestyle and privileges that are seen to emanate directly from that (Hage, 2003, cited in Ware, 2008: 12). Resentment, no matter how genuinely felt, therefore must be understood in the context of societies where whiteness has historically conferred some sort of guarantee of belonging and entitlement.

Second-class citizens: perceptions of privilege and prejudice

Steve Eddowes understands the anger EDL supporters feel as ‘a natural thing’. Anger is not something you choose but ‘things make you angry, and at the end of the day, if people don’t get angry sometimes then things don’t get done’ (Eddowes, 2015). Castells’s formulation of the process of the transformation of anxiety into anger and anger into action is illustrated in Tina’s story:

It makes you angry. It’s like you’re always angry. It’s like when that happened with the door. I was so angry, I was livid. When I was going to view houses and Somalis were getting them, I was absolutely livid, because I know for a fact they haven’t been in the country as long as I’ve been on that waiting list. I know for a fact they’re not sharing a house with their dying dad, you know what I mean? And my kids had to watch that because they were first priority over me and the council knew that, what the situation was, you know? (Tina)

The anger Tina recalls feeling relates to two moments in her life when she felt acutely aware that ‘others’ were being prioritised or privileged over her. The first incident – what she refers to as what ‘happened with the door’ – refers to a recent occasion when she had lost the keys to her front door. A neighbour (a white woman who had converted to Islam) advised her to call the council because, in the
same situation, she said, ‘within an hour’ the council had changed the locks free of charge for her. Tina had taken her advice but, she recounts, she had been given no help beyond a list of telephone numbers for locksmiths who would allow her to pay the bill in weekly instalments. When she rang them, however, none would agree to anything but immediate payment. As she continues the story, her anger grows and becomes physically articulated in a struggle to breathe as she relives the humiliation. In its retelling, the experience becomes framed as an example of the council’s preferential treatment of ethnic minorities for fear of being labelled racist itself:

I couldn’t get my breath at it. I was just so angry about it. I just thought, I mean, if I’d have said to them, ‘Right, you’re being racist. I’m Muslim’ or whatever, you know, ‘You’re discriminating against me ’cause I’m a Muslim’ without them actually seeing me, they’d probably have come out … and it just got me so angry. (Tina)

The second story she refers to is a more significant turning point in her personal narrative when she had had to move out of privately rented accommodation because her landlord did not renew her contract. She moved, she thought temporarily, into her mum’s house. The conditions were difficult. The whole family, that is, her, her partner and her four children, had a single room in a three-bedroom house shared also with her mum, her brother and his two children and her dad, who had terminal cancer. She had spent almost a year trying to access social housing and her memory of being ‘always second’ in the priority list for any house is extrapolated to an understanding of her status as ‘second-class’:

So I was on that bidding site. Ten months I had to live at my mum’s house in that one bedroom that was full of mould, and damp, and I was always second on the bidding list, and the number one always has first refusal of that house. Every single property that I went to view, Somalians got it, you know, and I was thinking … my kids have to watch their granddad die, do you know what I mean? The house is totally overcrowded. Why are they getting this house, do you know, like, it really got me angry … I was actually first-hand witnessing that I was a second-class citizen in this country. (Tina)

Tina’s account reflects her own interpretation of specific personal and traumatic events and could not be verified by observational data. However, the belief that the government gives preferential treatment to ethnic minorities in terms of access to benefits, social housing and jobs is commonplace among respondents in this study and the notion that immigrants and minority ethnic groups constitute a threat in that they compete for scarce economic resources is central to the ‘racial threat’ paradigm of understanding support for extreme right and populist parties (Goodwin, 2011a: 99; Rhodes, 2011: 108).

Housing is the most contentious issue. Like Tina, others cite personal experience to evidence privileged treatment of ethnic minorities. Carlie (who has
three children) said that only Asian families were given housing in her area while Casey recounts how, despite being a single parent from the age of 16, it had taken twelve to thirteen years ‘to get a house out of the council’. As a basic right, access to social housing is surrounded in particularly emotive discourse about belonging and entitlement and, while boundaries of ‘us’ and ‘them’ are deeply localised and far from always related to the colour of skin, housing has come to be perceived as a question of the redirection of state resources away from the white working class towards migrants and ethnic minority groups rather than as a question of shortage per se; it has in this sense become ‘racialized’ (Garner, 2009: 48). Dancygier (2010: 26–27) argues that this is a historical failing of the post-war UK immigration regime; the failure to prepare for the arrival of immigrants by setting aside vacant housing or building new houses meant that by the late 1960s (when many immigrants came to fulfil the minimum residency requirements to apply for council housing) there was intense competition over housing. However, the lack of affordable or social housing has been a core issue for populist radical right parties and movements in other countries too (for example CasaPound in Italy) (Bartlett, Birdwell and Littler, 2011: 96).

In this study, among respondents there also circulated an urban myth that ethnic or religious minority groups are privileged within the benefit system. Thus, Brett claims – based on comparing the £100 per fortnight he receives with the £160 he says a young Muslim woman (also single and without children) who lives on his mum’s estate gets – that ‘They get paid more than I do on the dole … because of their religion, race’ (my emphasis). Tina also said seeing immigrant families who were on benefits with top-notch phones had made her ask, ‘Are they entitled to more than what the average person is entitled to?’ She goes on to complain that ‘when they come into this country, they get given everything, absolutely everything’, whereas she herself, as a single mum, had worked long, overnight shifts stacking shelves at a supermarket yet struggled to afford even to clothe her children:

I couldn’t afford to treat the kids to even just some extra goodies in the shopping. I couldn’t afford nothing. If they needed a new pair of trainers, I used to have to scrimp and save for about a month just to get one pair, and they’re out shopping, you know, living it up. Bags from Primark and … River Island and God knows what, and I’m just thinking, ‘How can they afford that when I’m working five nights a week?’ I was knackered all the time. … I was missing out on my kids growing up, and when I did see my kids, I was nothing but snappy because I was exhausted, you know. … I mean, my kids were like, what, eleven, ten and nine at the time, so I’d been in the housing system and on that housing waiting list for ten years before I could get anything. They come in this country, bam, house, house done up, money to get everything they want … about five or six years ago, they even used to get free driving lessons … Can you get your breath at that? Their kids used to get free cricket lessons, about five, six years ago. … and I couldn’t afford to get my son into the local football team, do you know? It’s just the two-tier system. (Tina)
Similar outrage was vented by respondents in a study of racist violence in Manchester by Ray, Smith and Wastell (2004: 352) who claimed that the local South Asian community received targeted help for starting businesses and ‘free driving lessons’ as well as special deals on their council rents and higher social benefit payments.

The prominence of this discussion of benefits should be seen in the light of the recent shift in the base electoral support for the extreme right in the UK from skilled workers (who might be concerned about competition for jobs from immigrant workers) to unskilled manual workers and those dependent on state benefits who are ‘more concerned over competition for state benefits’ (Goodwin et al., 2010: 199–200). Indeed, Tina’s reference here to what she perceives as the injustice of the prioritisation of the needs of those recently arrived in the UK over her own appears to confirm the ‘undeserving’ beneficiaries discourse identified among BNP voters in Burnley (Rhodes, 2011: 108). Its expression, however, barely conceals its roots in the unacknowledged shame associated with feeling neglected, overlooked and undervalued (Ray, Smith and Wastell, 2004: 361–62). The anger, bitterness and resentment that appear as the personal disposition of Tina are rooted in structural relations of inequality whose experience is intensified by the feeling of being ‘misrecognized as valueless and judged unjustly by those considered undeserving of authority’ (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012: 482).

**Privilege: racialised, naturalised or politicised?**

A racialised discourse of the ‘unjust’ allocation of resources is an established component of extreme right ideology. In the mid-1980s the BNP youth wing distributed leaflets claiming ‘young Whites’ had been left on the scrapheap while ‘Britain’s coloured racial minorities’ received ‘specially favoured treatment’ (Goodwin, 2011a: 40). This sentiment is found in some respondents’ narratives in this study. Nick questions, ‘Why should we come second to foreigners in our own land?’ and links this ‘second-class’ status to an imagined (white) minority status resulting from the country’s immigration policy. Other respondents single out Muslims as being particularly privileged by the system:

> Like a young English male like myself … we’re not counted any more, we haven’t got as much rights as say a young Islamic 28 year old, I think he’s got more rights than me. You know, he can get more off the government than me. Say if I was not working. … And I just think it’s wrong. (Richard)

When asked what would be a ‘better society’ in her view, Tina echoes this belief, saying she would like to see ‘systems within government that are fair for everyone, not just Muslims. I mean, ’cause I’m not being funny, even Sikhs don’t get the same treatment. No other religion or culture gets the same treatment that Muslims get.’ This perception is found more widely among the UK population; surveys in 2007 and 2008 showed Muslims were the most frequently cited
group to receive – allegedly – preferential treatment by public services (Field, 2012: 152).

At the same time, Tina’s stories speak not to anger towards ‘Muslims’ in general or ‘Somalians’ in particular but a sense that ‘our rights’ have been forgotten or undermined by the rights accorded to others. In a reflection that answers the question Skeggs and Loveday (2012: 488) pose as to ‘What happens when the affects of anger and anxiety produced through injustice are not attached to their proper object?’, Tina recognises that it is not the beneficiaries of what she perceives to be privilege that are at fault but wider inequality and social division:

> There’s just no fairness in this country. And another thing, another thing, fairness between the poor and the rich, you know, close these gaps up. Just close ‘em up, because what, the main thing I can see in society that causes these divides, is when people are struggling, and they can see other people being treated so much differently. Like me, I hated them Somalians that got them houses because I had to go back and watch my dad die, with my kids, while I’m sleeping in a room full of damp in the middle of winter. (Tina)

Carlie also blames the government: ‘it is the government at the end of the day who is buggering everything up not EDL not BNP not the Muslims not us whites’. The negative impact for social cohesion of the lack of trust in public institutions to represent ‘us’, and the belief that they favour immigrants over the majority population, identified by Lone and Silver (2014), is noted above.

That political discourse inverts the reality they perceive around them is evident in the narratives of respondents in this study. While what they hear and read is that ethnic minority groups are underprivileged and discriminated against, what they experience themselves is a privileged treatment of those groups and their own ‘minority’ status. This is encapsulated in Tina’s outrage at a fellow student who had expressed a desire to work with Muslims as he perceived them to be discriminated:

> Why can’t you work in the community with all, with everyone? … I think it’s the systems in this country, and the two-tier systems, and people like him that actually cause so much friction, do you know what I mean? … [I]’s supposed to be a country of equality, treat everyone the same then, you know what I mean? (Tina)

Thus the government and its agencies are accused of protecting ‘them’ over ‘us’, even at the cost of denying real issues that need to be resolved. Michelle, for example, accuses the police and social workers of ‘covering’ grooming gangs while Tim vents his anger at the fact that treatments are sometimes deemed too expensive to provide on the NHS yet large sums of money are spent on counter-terrorism, ‘to keep a terrorist like Abu Qatada walking our streets freely’. Another strong motif of concern is the government’s perceived failure to adequately protect armed services personnel both in action and after they return (Michelle, Tim, Jordan).
The incapacity, or reluctance, of governments of advanced industrialised countries to address the accumulation of economic hardship, social dissolution and cultural dishonour in the deteriorating working class and/or ethnorial enclaves of their cities fuels civic alienation and social protest (Wacquant, 2008: 7). Wacquant (2008: 6) argues that state structures and policies play a decisive role in the differential stitching together of inequalities of class, place and origin. How this is translated into different outcomes in terms of local ethnic conflict is explored in detail in Dancygier’s (2010) comparative study of national and local immigration regimes and responses in the UK and Germany in the post-World War II period. At the country level, she argues, local conflict involving postcolonial migrants in Britain was greater than local conflict involving guest workers in Germany because policies that guided guest-worker migration (e.g. the provision of local resources, or the conditionality of migration and settlement on employment and housing) in Germany reduced the likelihood of competition over economic goods and lowered the incidence of immigrant conflict in the areas of settlement (2010: 9). At the same time, poorer economic rights for migrants in the UK were compensated by greater political rights since most New Commonwealth migrants were entitled to participate in local and national elections and their settlement in concentrated areas meant the political parties had to pay attention to their interests (2010: 82).

While, on the one hand, it can be seen here that for many respondents it is government agencies rather than immigrant communities that are ‘to blame’, there is a danger that accepting this discourse of second-class citizens naturalises assumptions of racially based inequality, that is, that ‘we’ should be prioritised and ‘they’ should be poorer; any other situation is evidence of discrimination against ‘us’. This, according to Rhodes (2009), is reflected in wider discursive tendencies to present racialised inequality ‘as reflective of a natural order’ embedded either in the market or in the tendency to self-marginalisation of ethnic minority communities. Despite perceptions of respondents in this study, Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are the most deprived social groups in the UK. In 2011, more than one in three members of the Bangladeshi and Pakistani community lived in a deprived neighbourhood, which is considerably more than any other ethnic group (the proportion is around 7 per cent for the White British population) (Jivraj and Khan, 2013). Indeed, the region in which this study of EDL activism was conducted showed the highest ethnic inequality in the country. This calls into question the notions of ‘fairness’ – based on constructing an equivalence between ethnic minority groups and whites as an endangered ethnic group (Ware, 2008: 9) – invoked by some respondents in this study. In the context of the historically conferred guarantee of belonging and entitlement that whiteness brings (2008: 12), Connor’s resentment that ‘it feels like we’re fucking immigrants in our own country … like the English don’t at all matter’ might be interpreted as a the understanding of racialised inequality as the natural order while poverty or disadvantage for the white majority is its inversion and perversion.
The two-tier system of justice

Injustice is perceived as determining not only the social but also the legal sphere. A central narrative of injustice – mentioned by more than half the respondents in this study – is the sense that there is no longer a ‘universal’ justice system but a ‘two-tier’ system which is weighted against ‘people like us’ (see Figure 3.9). There are two principal dimensions to this form of injustice. The first is the perception of a privileged sensitivity to the rights and needs of ethnic minority (especially Muslim) communities and is not exclusive to the respondent set. Muslims were thought to be unfairly advantaged by 39 per cent of the general population surveyed (2009) and to enjoy greater freedom of speech and action than British Christians by 56 per cent (2010) (Field, 2012: 151). The second element is more specific to those studied here and consists in: the sense of discrimination or persecution of ‘us’ – as EDL supporters – by the justice system and law enforcement agencies; and a wider construction of whiteness as a site of discrimination and victimisation.

The rights of ‘others’

A key symbol of the two-tier system for respondents is the ‘right’ afforded to Muslim women to wear the burqa. Nine respondents called directly for the burqa to be banned in public places; some noted their approval of the French decision to do so (Sean). Respondents objected to the wearing of burqas because they were ‘intimidating’ (Connor), degrading to women (Matt) or facilitated the concealment of criminals or terrorists (Sean). Others objected not to the burqa in and of itself but the right to wear it. For Theresa those who wore it were effectively ‘practising Sharia law’ and, in so doing, undermined the principle of the universality of the law. This, it is argued, goes unchallenged because the government is ‘scared’ to take a stand:

if you go to a petrol station you are not allowed to go in with your motorbike helmet on but if you’ve got a burqa on you are allowed to walk in there. … It’s just different rules for different … people and I don’t like the fact that the government are pussyfooting around with it and they are scared and that’s what annoys me. (Lisa)

The same example is given by Jason and Chas, while what Ray finds unfair is that you are not allowed to wear a balaclava or scarf around your face on the street (so they ‘can see your face on the cameras’) but wearing a burqa is permitted. Jordan complains that the government has advised troops that wearing uniform outside of barracks might be provocative, yet burqas are deemed acceptable: ‘it can’t be one rule [for some] and one rule for another’ (Jordan). Tim cites his own experience of rules being applied differentially at an EDL demonstration in Bolton:

… we were coming under heavy fire and I mean the police weren’t really doing anything and I noticed one person who stood out in this crowd was a man wearing a burqa and he kept pulling it up … and when everyone was wearing face
masks on our side they were going, ‘take them off’. And I said to the police, I says like, ‘look you see that man over there, turn’ and he goes, ‘oh I’m not prepared to turn round’ and I said, ‘but there’s a man over there who’s covering his face, wearing a burqa’. And he was throwing things over and I was just like disgusted by it. (Tim)

Another site of resentment was that Muslims were allowed to conform to Islamic rather than British law in the case of ritual slaughter. One respondent, who had joined the EDL originally over the halal meat issue, argued that it was unfair that, for religious reasons, Muslims can bypass UK laws stating that all animals should be stunned before being killed (field diary, 18 May 2013). The ‘privileged’ rights of ‘others’ are always seen in relation to the perceived injustice towards the self. In this instance, EDL activists argued that religious or cultural symbols for ethnic minority and faith communities are viewed as a ‘right’ while symbols important to them are deemed ‘offensive’ or provocative. Jordan points out a sticker on the front windscreen of his car showing the six members of the Royal Engineer Fusiliers based in the area killed in a single incident in Afghanistan (one was his friend). He tells me he was asked by a policeman to remove it because it might incite criminal damage to his car (field diary, 24 July 2013). Kane cites having been ‘kicked out’ of the local Asda supermarket for wearing his EDL hoody and recounts a story of ‘an old bloke’ having been beaten up by ‘three Muslims for no reason, just for having the England flag round his waist’. Another common complaint is that ‘the council come round my house and tell me to take my England flag down’ on the grounds that ‘it offends people’ (Eddowes, 2015). Perhaps most frequently mentioned are concerns about the perceived uneven justice meted out to those who offend Islam and those who violate what is held dear in Britain, symbolised by the poppy. Tim’s conviction that a ‘two-tier system’ was in operation had been strengthened when he had taken a seat in the public gallery of a Westminster court to hear a case brought in relation to the public burning of the poppy:

… it’s a two-tier system … a man burns a poppy which represents every single man and woman who’s gave a sacrifice … and yet they just do nothing about it. They give ’em a fifty pound fine and I went to that court down in Westminster … and I was sat there and … first of all they disrespected the British law by when they asked them to stand there they stayed seated and when they finally like did stand they told ’em to sit and they just laughed …. I had to like sit by these Al-Qaeda supporters and they were laughing about it in the courtroom and … and they gave ’em a fifty pound fine and they all like burst out laughing … laughing in the face of the law. (Tim)

He goes on to contrast this with the case of a man who had burnt a copy of the Qur’an not ‘out of disrespect to Muslims’ but in protest at this case and ‘our justice system’ and was sentenced to twelve months in prison (Tim). Expressing disgust at acts of poppy-burning, members of the local youth division compare the ‘£50 fine’ given to those prosecuted for it with the six-month prison sentence.
handed out to ‘two of our lads’ for spray-painting a poppy on the side of a mosque (Ray, Connor, Chris). Lisa complains that the EDL gets abused for the placards it carries at demonstrations when Islamist clerics like Abu Hamza are ‘standing on a box, you know, in the middle of our fucking city, saying that we are all scum and we should all die’. Declan also complains that ‘One of my mates in Dudley had a banner that said “Muslim paedophiles off our streets”, he had the flag confiscated off him because of a racial hatred crime’ yet, he says, ‘they’ are allowed to hold ‘placards saying “this soldier is going to hell” … “Islam and Sharia will dominate the UK”’, which, in his mind, was equally ‘a hate crime’. Tim sees this as making a mockery of the principle of the freedom of speech:

… it’s like freedom of speech has to apply like equally or not at all … It’s like if I walk down the street holding a Nazi flag I would be arrested and done, which quite rightly so, I should be imprisoned like. But they can walk down the street waving a … Al-Qaeda flag or a jihadi flag praising … the death of British soldiers and like you know almost rejoicing in British soldiers dying in our streets but nothing, that’s freedom of speech. (Tim)

EDL activists understand injustice to arise out of the uneven application of rules and laws. In expressing this injustice, Muslims are the object of ‘othering’ – ‘they are so protected in this country’ (Declan) – but it is the government which is at fault. As Declan continues, ‘The government will appease Islam just to make them happy. Like we have got Sharia courts now just for their benefit’. He concludes that this has resulted in the unacceptable situation in which there are ‘two laws for two communities’. Tim goes further to suggest that this attention to the rights of religious groups undermines the basic principles upon which the rule of law is founded: ‘the law should be absolutely neutral’, he says, rather than being ‘bent around religion’.

**Demonstrations, violence and the full force of the law: the two-tier system in action**

Personal experience of the ‘two-tier system’ is, for most respondents, associated with their participation in demonstrations and other EDL activism. Participants in this research described this experience as illustrating a differential treatment of them and ‘the opposition’ (UAF, MDL). According to Connor, ‘The police treat you like you’re fucking animals. … The first sign of anything kicking off you get bent. We get battered, while UAF or MDL get the run of the town.’ The metaphor used to describe this differential treatment is often that EDL are treated ‘like animals’ (Richard, Connor, Chris, Tim, Chris) and it is cited as partially responsible for ensuing violence at demonstrations. ‘If you treat us like animals we’re going to act like animals’, says Connor. The failure to control counter-demonstrators is also blamed for encouraging violence and, when violence does occur, respondents say, the police are concerned only with the protection of the opposition.
I mean we had dogs set on us and things like that. There was, a lot of times as well the police would face us and so … the missiles were coming over, we were all getting hit. There’s people bleeding and then we say like to the police, ‘do something about it’. … You are being penned in and they might as well have put a big target over us. … [W]e were treated like animals a lot of the time (Tim).

In contrast to the routine use of police dogs to push back the EDL, respondents claimed that the police have a policy of not deploying dogs against counter-demonstrators because it would be offensive to the Muslim community (Richard, Jason).5

Alongside many accounts of the experience of police violence, respondents also praise and often empathise with officers policing demonstrations. As one of the most seasoned of demonstrators, Tim had seen both the good and bad in policing: ‘I’ve seen some coppers do some disgusting things … but seen some police officers who have been great and sometimes right within seconds of each other’ (Tim). Police ‘liaison’ officers were often excellent at moving around the crowd, chatting and reducing tension, treating demonstrators with respect and receiving it in return. It was routine at EDL demonstrations for leaders or Local Organisers to thank the police, sometimes with a round of applause, and stress the importance of acting peacefully (field diary, 12 October, 2013). This is more than a token gesture; during the course of research numerous everyday, respectful, humorous interactions between EDL members and police officers were observed and recorded including the following excerpt from the field diary entry on a flash against a proposed plan to open a Muslim prayer centre:

While we are standing there a late middle-aged woman comes up and tells the group that she thinks what they are doing is ‘despicable’ and that they are ‘bigots’. Ian and another respondent talk to her and put forward their concerns about ‘creeping Islamisation’. The police watch on and afterwards comment that they thought the EDL had handled the situation well and that they are not there to intervene in a peaceful exchange of views. This seems to breed good will between the two sides. (field diary, 18 May 2013)

Given the quite different story that follows about the Walsall demonstration, it is important to acknowledge that animosity and violence are the exception rather than the rule.

On 29 September 2012, an EDL demonstration in Walsall descended into prolonged violence. The events of that day, or more accurately, the arrests, prosecutions and narrativisation of events that followed, illustrate how their experience at demonstrations cements the EDL’s sense of being treated ‘differently’. It is not entirely clear why a relatively small demonstration should descend into violence. Factors differentiating it from previous or subsequent largely peaceful demonstrations include the fact that demonstrators had not been allowed to march, so a static protest was held and the pubs in the designated area for the demonstration were left open throughout the event. There was also a significantly higher proportion of young people than usual, although observations recorded in the diary suggest that it was not these young people who were in the thick of the
violence (field diary, 29 September 2012). Over the course of around 45 minutes, missiles (beer cans, placards, wooden planks, pieces of flag stone and even a drain cover) were thrown from the EDL side of the demonstration towards the police and the counter-demonstrators beyond, while the police, deployed in full riot gear, launched baton attacks and used police dogs to push back the EDL line. A number of casualties – especially head wounds – were sustained by EDL demonstrators (see Figure 3.10), although it was impossible to tell at the time whether these were from missiles thrown or baton attacks. Interviewed after the events Connor was adamant that the violence had ensued not from EDL aggression but police (in)action: a failure, first of all to keep the counter-demonstrators out of the line of vision; and a subsequent overreaction to the EDL response to taunts from behind the police lines.

The coppers kicked that demo off, not us. It was the Muslims and the police who did that. And the copper specifically let that Muslim who was dressed in Adidas with a bandana around his face, it’s a bit obvious what he is there for you know. … [T]hem coppers day give a shit about him but as soon as we reacted they battered us. We walked out with cuts on our heads. That’s like proper police brutality. (Connor)

Euan confirms Connor’s claim that it was the counter-demonstrators who had sparked the violence but goes on to argue that the special protection afforded ‘them’ leads the police to ‘wade into us’:

You can see it, you know, that there is a two-tier system going on. It’s like up there at Walsall there was a group of about thirty Asians come past and was throwing bottles. That was what started it all off originally. … There is footage of it and all. The police do absolutely nothing about it. They just turn on us and start hitting us. It’s almost like they are not allowed to hit them, you know, but they are allowed to just wade into us. ‘We can’t hit them so I’m just going to vent my frustration on these white lads here because I’m allowed to do that’ and it just don’t seem right. (Euan)

It is also true, however, that the police were being bombarded with missiles from a group of people who had congregated outside the Wetherspoon’s pub. They started by throwing gravel before proceeding to trash the outside furniture and plant pots and throw large planks of wood and pieces of plant pot at the police. They then began to dismantle the wall, breaking stone flags into smaller pieces by dropping them on the ground before throwing these too (field diary, 29 September 2012). The people in this group were not familiar to me nor those I had attended the demonstration with – many of whom spent much of the time wandering around shaking their heads at the unfolding violence and muttering ‘this isn’t good’ (field diary, 29 September 2012). I noted also in my diary that those throwing missiles were not in EDL colours and Rachel later commented that she had noticed people wearing T-shirts with ‘13–12’ (‘All Coppers Are Bastards’) on them, which she had not seen before at EDL demonstrations. It is possible that
the violence, or at least this element of it, was caused by outsiders or local criminal elements rather than EDL demonstrators.

A total of thirty arrests were made on the day, with subsequent arrests in dawn raids in March 2013. There followed a series of ‘group’ prosecutions, mainly for ‘violent disorder’. One of the respondents in this study, Jack, was charged with this offence and I attended his trial in Crown Court in October 2013. Despite the police having reviewed 300 hours of CCTV and other video footage, there was no clear evidence of Jack (or his co-defendant) having used violence. The video evidence placed him at the police lines when the violence took place but did not capture any direct use or threat of violence. One of two police officers gathering intelligence from within the EDL demonstration, however, stated that Jack had been heard ‘inciting’ others to violence by calling them down to the police line to ‘go get’ counter-demonstrators (UAF). Jack was found guilty.

After the verdict, as those in court were preparing to leave but the defendants were still in the dock, the judge, who was responsible for sentencing those prosecuted on this ‘collective’ charge, asked counsel to clarify which people precisely he would be sentencing. In particular, he asked, referring to the footage shown during the trial of the man in the bandana described by Connor above, if he would also be sentencing the ‘Asian man who provoked the EDL from the wall’. He was told by Jack’s counsel that this young man ‘had already been dealt with in the Magistrates’ court’. The judge frowned and said ‘I don’t think he should have been, it should have been sent to Crown Court.’ Outside, Jack asked his barrister to confirm if he had understood correctly; he responded that he had and the young man in question had been sentenced to twelve weeks and would serve six (field diary, 9 October 2013). On 17 December, Jack was sentenced to thirty-six months in prison.

The colours of racism: whiteness as a site of discrimination and victimisation

As discussed in earlier chapters, EDL activists in this study maintain that they ‘don’t really see what skin colour matters’ (Tim) and, in some cases, reject classification as ‘white’ when asked to state their ethnicity on official forms (Carlie, Declan). ‘Colour’ or ‘whiteness’ is voiced, however, where it is seen as a site of discrimination or victimisation. This perception of white victimisation results from a failure on the part of respondents to identify as members of a privileged ‘majority’ and an understanding of themselves rather as a discriminated minority. Power relations are inverted, in their minds, as they confront a ‘system’ weighted against them by the ability of others to ‘play the racist card’ (Chris). Non-whiteness, it follows, is transformed into a powerful tool, institutionalised in the law and used against ‘us’ who are rendered victims of the process.

Claims of discrimination are encountered in the context of the competition for limited resources discussed above. Carlie claims that she has not been able to access social housing because she is white: ‘I mean I’ve been on homes lists for
five years and I had to go private in the end because I couldn’t get a house off the council. … I’m the wrong colour, put it that way.’ Discrimination is sometimes also perceived in the cultural, or even emotional, sphere. Thus Casey complains that a teacher (who she describes as ‘Asian’) at her daughter’s primary school had demonstratively discriminated against the ‘white kids’ by giving presents to the Chinese and Asian children ‘on their Christmas’ but refusing to participate in Christmas events for ‘the white kids’.

Ian’s account of his struggle to avoid eviction from his house provides a vivid illustration of victimisation narratives framed in resentment towards ethnic ‘others’ perceived to be (undeservedly) successful and in positions of power in relation to them. In this account, perhaps because of a more deeply rooted shame at his inability to get out of debt and long-term unemployment (see Ray, Smith and Wastell, 2004: 362), Ian turns his anger on an individual housing officer whom he perceives as illegitimately exerting her power over him:

**IAN:** My housing officer has decided to put in for eviction for me. … [S]he’s a Muslim …

**INT:** But she’s not making the law, I mean she’s applying rules that she is given …

**IAN:** Is she? … I’ve had her drive up my street, stop, and I caught her walking up to my house looking through my living room window. I went out and says ‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’ Her went ‘I can come and look in your house any time I want. I can look through your living room window any time I want.’ I actually threatened to set the dogs on her if her day jog on … then the police get a report that I’ve got a racist poster up in my living room window. … It had ‘no more terrorist training mosques’ on. It was a demo poster which has been okayed by the chief of police cause they check all of the posters before you carry ‘em … police turned up, raided my house … turned round and went ‘I can’t see nothing racist about the poster but we know you have got a problem with the neigh- borhood officer I will suggest you take it down just to keep yourself from harm’. (Ian)

An eviction notice had been issued nonetheless, he claimed, on the grounds that he had not completed the necessary form regarding a discretionary payment, even though he had hand-delivered it (witnessed by a friend who had accompanied him) and had it stamped and photocopied in the neighbourhood office. This Ian attributes to a deliberate act of racialised victimisation on the part of his housing officer, concluding ‘and then people expect me to trust Muslims. Everybody says they want my house, even the police have turned round and said “Wind your neck in, they want your house”.’

Such stories are often told in the form of a David and Goliath narrative in which respondents position themselves as the underdog fighting the system, as is illustrated in the conclusion to Ian’s story of his eviction struggle:

He tells me he had been in court again last week over his house. He had been sent another eviction order by [names housing association] even though his total arrears are around £500 only and he has a court agreement about paying them back at £14 per month. He says he had sought legal help and eventually got a court hearing. The magistrate had immediately said that it was a ridiculous sum
to evict for and quashed the order and told him to go back and tell the housing association that they should not be doing this. His solicitor, after the hearing, apparently said to him ‘tell me what’s really going on’ because he had had two calls from [names housing association] prior to the hearing saying they would fight the appeal tooth and nail. According to the solicitor this was the smallest arrears he had ever seen an eviction order over and so he thought something else must be wrong. Ian then told them that he was EDL and the solicitor immediately replied ‘And they are all Asians in that office’ and then, apparently, congratulated him on winning. (field diary, 3 September 2013)

Narratives of victimhood of course cannot be treated uncritically and, in this case, a different interpretation was encountered in an interview with Kylie (Ian’s daughter) who was sceptical about her father’s version of events, commenting that her dad had a tendency to ‘blame the world for everything’.

It is the judicial system which features most frequently in narratives of victimisation, however. Respondents routinely claim that the law is applied differentially on the basis of the ‘skin colour’ of the perpetrator and victim.

**brett:** Say I go for a fight, with someone that’s from Pakistan, I hit them it’s a racial attack. If they batter the hell out of me it’s a fight.

**neil:** It’s just common assault.

**connor:** It’s wrong. Just because of their skin colour it gets taken different. I mean all I want really is equal rights, cause it ain’t equal.

Narratives of white victimisation combine reference to personal experience and ‘notorious’ cases, which circulate in social media and become celebrated causes. There is frequent reference, for example, to incidents of racist abuse, bullying, violence or murder perpetrated against people who are white, which, it is claimed, are neither reported by the media nor punished appropriately. A small number of respondents complain that they have experienced racist verbal abuse. Tina cites an incident when a group of Asian and ‘Afro-Caribbean lads’ had shouted ‘White slag!’ at her while she was waiting at the bus stop while Lisa reports that she has ‘been called a stupid black bitch’ by ‘East European’ immigrants. A classic example is provided by Kevin Carroll who, in his speech to demonstrators in Dewsbury in 2012, cited the case of a local man who, while out with his girlfriend, had been beaten up ‘by Muslims’ and died of his injuries. The perpetrators, he says, were sentenced to just twenty-one months in prison in the case of one and six months suspended with community service in the other (field diary, 30 June 2012). This kind of incident, which respondents perceive as racially motivated but not recognised as such by the judicial system, is referenced thirty times.

**These Muslim girls kick the absolute shit out of this white British girl. I mean, even, she’s on the floor unconscious and they’re kicking the fuck, and they got off with it in court, because they drank and, because of their religion, they wasn’t used to alcohol, so they got off with it. No cautions, got off with it. Nothing done,**
no punishment at all. Now, if that was me and a couple of my mates that went out and beat the shit out of a Muslim girl, I’d be getting 5 years, if not more … Do you know what I’m saying about two-tier system? (Tina)

The same case is cited by Jack, who, complaining at the acquittal, notes,

If … five of us would of attacked a Muslim it would have been affray, it would have been a racist attack and we’d have been jailed for it. There is now double standards in this country. If you are a white, ethnic British person and you do something like that you’re a racist. (Jack)

However, such accounts do not go unchallenged. When a demonstration is called in June 2013 in Ashton-under-Lyne supposedly in response to the attack by a group of Asians on ‘white kids’ outside a mosque, Ian expresses his doubt, seeing the incident as ‘more of a gang against gang thing and that there had been an earlier altercation and the white kids had deliberately gone to the mosque to provoke. Not surprising they got thumped’ (field diary, 16 June 2013).

The most frequently cited example of what is perceived to be ‘double standards’ is that of the murder in March 2004 of Kriss Donald, a 15 year old from Glasgow, by ‘three Asian gang members … because he was white’. Although, as The Guardian report cited here makes clear, in this case the racial motivation of the murder was recognised, the length of the minimum sentences were criticised by respondents for being too short (Declan). The real injustice, however, is seen to be the relative lack of attention this murder received, ‘Yet Stephen Lawrence even now after ten years later, he gets headlines, headlines, headlines’ (Mike).

Issues around unrecognised ethnic bullying are raised routinely. A local incident in which a 9-year-old schoolboy had committed suicide apparently because of bullying at school by ‘Asian’ pupils is mentioned frequently. Andrew had organised a flash demo outside the school to protest at it:

… the boy was bullied for being white by an ethnic minority and it was in his own country as well and we think that that was very wrong, and also it was wrong how he didn’t get much media attention, and how nobody seemed to care. Whereas if that was the other way around then they’d all be demonstrating and protesting. It’d be all over the news. (Andrew)

These incidents, circulated via social media, often spark uncomfortable associations with respondents’ own personal experience:

It’s like Newcastle MDL they posted a video of a young British lad walking back home from school, the MDL was videoing ’em bullying the British kid. He was just walking home and they was just throwing stuff at him, bullying him, calling him words, and you could tell he day wanna be there. He day know what to do or anything. I felt sorry for him cause I got bullied in school myself and there’s young Muslims that go off round here at the moment. They think they own the place pretty much. (Kane)
School is frequently mentioned as a site of the experiencing of discrimination and victimisation. These accounts are often rooted in one’s own ‘minority’ status and an accompanying sense of powerlessness. Brett, for example, explains that his nephew and nieces attend a school which is ‘Muslim run’ and there are just four white pupils in a school of 500:

And like they all terrorise my nephew and niece, and when my nephew and niece hit ’em back and they’ve removed them from the school cause of it. I mean there’s a group of lads hitting my little nephew and he hits ’em back and he gets kicked out of school for it. It’s wrong. It’s like me when I was in [names school] a few years ago, year eight, a Muslim lad smacked me over the head with a chair so I grabbed his head and smashed his head on the table. I got kicked out the school for it, and it was on camera him hitting me over the head with a chair. … I got kicked out of school for a racial attack. (Brett)

This expression of injustice among white pupils, who claimed that name-calling by black students was ignored while white students were expelled for using racist taunts, was found by Nayak (2003: 146–48) also in schools in the West Midlands and North East of England. A number of other respondents reported being bullied at school by pupils of other ethnic groups (Andrew, Jordan, Nick). Nick says he was ’picked on’ by Asian and black kids at school and, when he had reported it to teachers ‘they weren’t really that interested in it … they said, “Oh you caused the problems yourself”, trying to call me a racist’. Nick continues to explain ‘that’s why I started to dislike them [the ‘non-white’ kids]’. Both Nick and Brett (whose story is noted above) were 16 years old at the time of interview and these incidents, in which they perceive themselves to have been labelled racists when they were actually the victims of racist bullying or violence, signal a ’turning point’ in their narratives reminiscent of a similar case cited by Garland and Treadwell (2011: 628) of an EDL supporter who had got involved in football firm violence after he had been ’battered by a load of Pakis at college’. Kimmel (2007: 209) also found that all but one of the Scandinavian participants interviewed in his study of former neo-Nazis passing through the EXIT programme had been bullied while other studies of EXIT participants suggested ‘bullying was a common unifying theme’ among the participants and that those bullied felt they had not received the support they needed to stand up to it (2007: 209). The disregard for their own distress confirms their own sense of devaluation (Skeggs and Loveday, 2012) and is compounded by the feeling that the assumption of the police in Asian-white incidents of violence would always be that any racist motive was to be found in the white party to the conflict (Ray, Smith and Wastell, 2004: 359). Complaining that three EDL organisers had been arrested for posting ‘racial tweets’ in the run up to the Newcastle demonstration (May 2013), Tommy Robinson notes ironically that he had made the police aware of over 200 death threats he had received against himself and his family but none had been followed up. Nobody, he said, had ever been prosecuted for hatred or violence towards EDL members (field diary, 25 May 2013).
The right to grievance? Resisting second-class status

Less than a week after the Conservative Party won the 2015 UK General Election, Prime Minister David Cameron announced new laws ostensibly designed to strengthen legal options to ban groups, individuals and events that promote hatred and intolerance, making it ‘harder for people to promote extremist views’.9 The UK’s ‘passively tolerant society’, he argued, however, has bred not only the harmful ‘narrative of extremism’ but also that of ‘grievance’.10 The right to grievance, it appears, is also under review.

As has been detailed in this chapter, a key motivation for EDL grassroots activists is the articulation of grievance – understood as the hardship and injustice they perceive themselves to experience – through the emotionally charged narrative of ‘self’ as ‘second-class citizens’. EDL activism provides a mechanism for resisting this perceived second-class status through a discursive reordering of privilege and prejudice in which ‘we’ are seen as the discriminated and those in power are exposed as a liberal elite of ‘do-gooders’ who have little understanding of the everyday worlds of ordinary people. Activism is a way of saying ‘I don’t want to be a second-class citizen in my own country’ (Connor). People join the EDL ‘because they can see like our community is basically being neglected while other communities get, you know, gold-card treatment. So they’re angry and they want to do something about it’ (Euan). In this final section of the chapter we ask what class is second-class? And whom are EDL activists angry with?

Interviewed on BBC’s Newsnight programme, Tommy Robinson stated that the EDL is a movement of the working class whose voices need to be listened to (BBC Newsnight, 8 October 2013). Those who are prepared to ‘stand up’, Tim suggests, are those who have little to lose: ‘the kind of people who are gonna stand up, you know, the working class’ (Tim). Theresa makes the same connection between class and EDL activism: ‘working-class people are less afraid of saying what they think’. The EDL is experienced as a space for working-class people to ‘stand up’; ‘you wouldn’t see posh Eaton boys become part of the EDL’, jokes Chas alluding to the educational background of the current political elite. Indeed, the anger at their perceived second-class status is levelled precisely at politicians who wield huge power, yet ‘don’t know what it’s like to live at this end of the spectrum’.

In fifteen years’ time, my kids ain’t gonna have a leg to stand on in this country. … [T]hat same divide will still be there even though the British will be the minority then. They will still be getting nothing, and they’ll be getting everything. Do you know what I mean? It’s just fairness, and this is why I want to go into politics. Not only because of Muslims obviously, but just because, like, government just cause [there are] so many divides. It’s like, they decide on things, they decide on the life of people when they’ve never walked in the shoes of them people living that life. … They just, they’ve got no real life experience at all. They don’t know what it’s like to live at this end of the spectrum. They just don’t understand it. (Tina; emphasis in original)
In this context, the struggle becomes a broader one in which the opposing sides are politically as well as economically defined. ‘We’ are ‘just like the common people like the people fighting back you know just saying “look we’ve had enough”’ (Tim) while ‘they’ (the political class regardless of party affiliation) are ‘just do-gooders’ who ‘act like … everything’s for the people when nothing is’ (Tina). EDL activism is thus also a form of refusal by a devalued and ridiculed section of the working class to authorise the ‘do-gooders’ who claim the authority to judge them in distinctively moral ways (see: Skeggs and Loveday, 2012). Notwithstanding the very real and divisive forms of racialised self-understanding and hostility to multiculturalism such resistance can take, it is possible that some such grievances deserve to be heard rather than immediately dismissed as motivated by narrow-minded prejudice (Kenny, 2012: 24–25). Whether one agrees with Kenny or not, the case of the EDL suggests that the outlawing of the expression of ‘grievance’ can only exacerbate social division and thus fuel rather than tackle extremism.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter the focus has shifted from unpacking anxieties about the ‘other’ to a distinctive narrative of self as ‘second-class citizens’. It has detailed the everyday encounters respondents interpret as evidence of the privileging of the rights and needs of ‘others’ – in terms of concrete goods such as social housing, benefits and jobs as well as looser cultural needs for self-expression and respect for tradition – to the direct detriment of their own interests. The anger elicited at the everyday level is reframed in a wider discourse of injustice in which the object of frustration is sometimes a racialised ‘other’ but primarily political actors, who fail to protect the rights of ‘people like us’, and a ‘two-tier’ justice system, which institutionalises this injustice.

It has been argued that this narrative of second-class citizenship reveals the way in which sections of the white working class fail to recognise ‘self’ as the privileged majority. They perceive themselves rather as the victims of discrimination and in some cases violence or abuse; the anger at this is amplified by the conviction that such discrimination and abuse goes unrecognised by the media, police and political system when the victims are white. ‘Whiteness’ is invoked here as a site of discrimination where, as we saw in earlier chapters, respondents had been keen to expunge colour from their discourse, denying the significance or pertinence of ‘race’ and positioning themselves as ‘not racist’. It is important therefore that we recognise that even when respondents target anger and ‘blame’ for their perceived ‘second-class’ status at government and its agencies rather than immigrant communities, they nonetheless naturalise assumptions of racially based inequality; that ‘we’ not ‘they’ should be prioritised is the natural order (Rhodes, 2009).

EDL activism is experienced by respondents in this study as a means of resisting this perceived second-class citizen status. At the discursive level this is accomplished through a reordering of privilege and prejudice and a collective
understanding of the EDL as a movement of ‘the common people’ prepared to ‘stand up’ and ‘fight back’ against the government and wider circles of power controlled by liberal elite ‘do-gooders’ who have little understanding of the everyday worlds they inhabit. Does this mean that movements like the EDL are locked within a politics of resentment, racism and grievance? Or are there grounds to understand arguments made on behalf of white working-class communities as a form of recognition politics (Kenny, 2012: 24)? The question of how we interpret and respond politically to this articulation of grievance is returned to in Chapter 8.

Notes

1 Parts of Burnley rank in the most deprived 1 per cent of boroughs in the country (Rhodes, 2009).

2 Although Ray, Smith and Wastell refer to this as urban folklore, and its formulation bears the hallmarks of such, there is some evidence of the introduction of pilot schemes to improve the employability of those on benefits by providing a package of driving lessons (see www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1478175/Migrants-to-get-free-driving-lessons.html. Accessed: 30.0.2015). There is no evidence to suggest such schemes were exclusively for migrants and asylum-seekers.

3 This is based on 2011 Census data using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (2010) to determine deprived neighbourhoods based on seven factors: income, employment, health, education, barriers to housing and services, crime, and living environment (Jivraj and Khan, 2013).

4 In fact, the Food Standards Agency estimates that 88 per cent of animals in the UK killed by halal methods are stunned beforehand. See www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2014/may/08/what-does-halal-method-animal-slaughter-involve. Accessed: 27.08.2015.


6 Photographs and video footage of events can be found at www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/local-news/edl-protest-in-walsall-video-more-4925. Accessed: 0.05.2014.

7 ‘Violent disorder’ is point 2 of the Public Order act 1986 and is used in a case when there are three or more people who use or threaten violence that might cause people to fear for their safety.


9 Extremism is defined in the government’s Prevent strategy as ‘vocal or active opposition to fundamental British values including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty, mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs. In addition, calling for the deaths of members of the armed forces.’