



Far-right millennials

Right-wing nationalists are on the march in Europe and the US. But if you're picturing men with shaved heads, think again. Polly Dunbar meets the young British women drawn to the extreme edge of politics

1 I'm on the Strand in London, watching 300 men and women wave St George's Cross flags and chant 'terrorist scum off our
5 streets'. They're members of Britain First, a far-right political party. Along with the English Defence League (EDL), the party is using the recent Westminster attack as an

10 opportunity to 'march against terror'.

Witnessing the presence of a group who want a ban on Islam in the UK is shocking. Even more so is the sight of young far-right women
15 in their ranks. At the helm is Britain First's deputy leader, 31-year-old Jayda Fransen. This woman describes Islam as a 'cancer of the world' and has proclaimed 'there
20 is no such thing as a "moderate" Muslim'. Stepping outside my

liberal London bubble, in which my views – pro-Europe, inclusive – are echoed by my friends and
25 colleagues, I want to understand why increasing numbers of millennial women are attracted to far-right politics.

Sprouting extremism

30 Many nationalist parties are experiencing a resurgence across Europe. In the Netherlands, Italy, Denmark, and Sweden, far-right parties have thrived; while in
35 France, Marine Le Pen, leader of the anti-immigration Front National, soared in popularity to become a strong contender in last year's presidential election. She may not
40 have won, but still, 10.6 million people voted for her.

In the UK, the Metropolitan Police reported a 'horrible spike' in hate crimes after the Brexit vote.

45 In 2015, nearly 4 million people voted for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP), the populist, anti-immigration party, which until recently wanted to
50 abolish statutory maternity pay. Its leader, Paul Nuttall, favours banning burqas in public places. A recent poll indicated UKIP is now more popular than Labour among
55 working-class voters.

First dibs

I speak to Kerry, 32, a Britain First supporter who lives in Huddersfield, West Yorkshire. She first became
60 interested in the party last October, after seeing Fransen speak at a

rally in nearby Dewsbury. 'I was impressed,' she says. 'Jayda is my age and said things I agree with, about how Muslims are taking over our country and won't integrate. I never really voted before, but it made me want to get involved. There are a lot of Muslims and extremism in West Yorkshire, so I know what Jayda is talking about. One of the 7/7 bombers was from Dewsbury. Terrorist attacks keep happening, and I think we should be protecting ourselves. There have been times I've struggled to get a job. I get upset because immigrants often seem to have more opportunities than me and my friends.' The anger in her voice is clear.

'Research shows that people don't care if immigrants are having good lives when they're satisfied with their own,' says Dr Tereza Capelos, senior lecturer in political psychology at the University of Birmingham. 'When people blame foreigners, their own conditions are at the root.'

The supremacy of social media

Yet it's difficult to comprehend the appeal of far-right groups to young women. They're dominated by men whose ideals about everything are regressive, including women's rights. Britain First founder Jim Dowson is an anti-abortion campaigner. Yet, as Daniel Trilling, the author of *Bloody Nasty People: The Rise of Britain's Far Right*, points out, these men have now found a way to frame themselves as protectors of women against Islam. The Internet has also fuelled

interest in ideologies outside of the mainstream, exposing young people to more far-right viewpoints. And in the age of fake news, there are countless sources to bolster these views, particularly as many on the right distrust what they call the MSM, mainstream media. The rise of the alt-right – which has repackaged white nationalism with a veneer of rebellious cool – occurred almost entirely on social media. We live so much of our lives online that it's easy to be swayed by a post from someone we admire, and many far-right groups are using this as a tool. The leading figures of the alt-right movement, including Paul Joseph Watson and Milo Yiannopoulos (who each have thousands of YouTube subscribers), are young, intelligent, and articulate – I find them surprisingly plausible, despite disagreeing with their views. It's not impossible to imagine how someone feeling alienated could discover a group online, find one or two of its views appealing, and then begin to adopt others.

Opposites attract – or do they?

Flo Lewis, 28, a gunsmith from Market Drayton in Shropshire, joined UKIP in 2013. She used to identify with the Liberal Democrats, but felt let down when they reneged on their promise to drop university tuition fees. Lewis joined UKIP and says the party 'believes in equality – everyone is judged on their own merits'.

Lewis is also the chair of UKIP'S LGBT group. She says she's never experienced homophobia in the

party. 'I invite curiosity, but I enjoy educating people about LGBT issues,' she says. 'I also enjoy showing people outside UKIP that we're not what they expect – people often assume we're racists and homophobes. We believe in equality.' Still, for people like myself, it's hard not to worry that leaderships could cite the prominence of women like her in right-wing parties as evidence that they have embraced diversity, while they actually promote the opposite. For some women, the appeal of the far right lies in its opposition to the status quo. 'Many ideas that once seemed radical, including equal rights for women, are now mainstream,' says Dr Capelos. 'This generates a counter-narrative.'

Showing your cards

'Focusing on someone to blame – immigrants, the EU, those who claim welfare, women, or minorities – can be appealing when the world seems so uncertain and the challenges so big,' says Labour MP Stella Creasy on the rise of the far right. 'Our responsibility is not to hide from these arguments, but tackle them head on to show how a grievance is not the same as a solution. Changing the world and giving people the opportunities they need to succeed in life requires answers, actions, and allies. We can only find those when we work together.'

It's difficult to identify with women who hold views so different from my own – views I believe are damaging to our society. Yet after watching some of the thousands of videos by alt-right figures such as Yiannopoulos and Alex Jones, and reading websites such as Breitbart, I can see how their ideas could start to be persuasive for some young women. They purport to offer answers in an uncertain world. Moreover, after speaking to some of them, I understand that what they're searching for, more than anything, is an identity. We can all relate to that. And that allure, at a time when many people feel disillusioned with mainstream politics, is disturbingly powerful. <<

