The New Exodus

In any sane world, an organisation that delivered low-cost entertainment, housing and job creation in an area of high youth unemployment would be applauded. Exodus is one such organisation. If the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill had been in force two years ago, they'd probably all be in jail, as Tim Malyon reports

"The best way to describe the people in our community is to liken them to the buildings that we use. These building are redundant. So what we are, we're redundant people. We're not drop-outs, we're force-outs, we're people who are not wanted any more, one of five million who are unemployed or unwanted. There's no future for us in Britain plc." That's Glenn Jenkins' description of Exodus, the Luton dance and squatting collective. Glenn's a former train driver and ASLEF shop steward, now Exodus' spokesperson.

Exodus' Luton chapter opened on June 5 1992. Richard Jenkins, Glenn's brother, is another of the founders, otherwise known as DJ Hazad. "I'd always dreamed of a stack [PA speakers] just a bit taller than me, so me and all my friends could go into a field and listen to Bob Marley." Typical of DIY culture and what was to come, Rich heard of about three empty speaker boxes that had been thrown into a skip. "I took them back to me Mum's garage, stacked them one on top of the other, and there's me stack."

A couple of days later he bumped into "Jack the Stack". Jack was fitting car audios at the time, but reckoned he could fit speakers into Rich's cabinets. Rich bought three speakers and an amplifier which Jack promptly fitted. "And then on June 5 1992 we took that stack up to a forest at the back of Dunstable, went to the two main pubs, told the people there was a party going on, and up they came. It went from 150 people for that first do to about a thousand by the third do." Money from the soft drinks bar and bucket collections was poured back into extending the stacks. By New Year's Eve 1992/93, they formed a wall 30 ft long by 12 ft high, and 10,000 people had joined the party.

"It wasn't the intention to do the parties unlicensed," Glenn explained. "We spoke to the licensing officer, we spoke to the police and although there was a general 'Oh yeah, sure, go ahead' there was then telephone-size bills put in front of us for the licences. Obviously that was beyond us, being unemployed local youth."

So Exodus undertook "a demonstration of the need for parties". It established a gathering point every Saturday night on a local industrial estate. People would form a convoy and drive en masse to the chosen venue. The assembly point was on Chief Inspector Mike Brown's patch, from Dunstable police. "The people who were running these unlicensed raves were trying to avoid violence, so I adopted a dual approach, on the one hand risk management for those attending, on the other hand, actively looking for a way for Exodus to hold these events legally." Brown's motto was: "jaw, jaw, not war, war". We need more more such officers.

A relationship of mutual respect developed between Brown and Exodus' members, who consider him "a pukka copper". Brown co-operated with Exodus in bringing in the fire brigade, once venues had been occupied, to advise on reducing fire risks. He was quoted in local papers appealing for suitable premises for Exodus to hold licensed dances.

Brown also noticed something interesting happening in Dunstable on weekends when Exodus held its dances. "Licensed premises were experiencing a loss of trade. People might pop into the pub for a quick drink, but then they'd be off. Some licensees were starting to get into financial trouble. As a consequence there was a lessening of alcohol-related offences, the public disorder that generally goes with town centres and drink." Coincidentally, the crime rate in Luton dropped by six per cent that year.

Not all police areas treated Exodus in the same fashion as Mike Brown. Squats occupied by Exodus members were raided seven times in eight months. "They smeared dog shit on our beds, nicked out money and trashed our gaffs," Jenkins alleges. Some police will happily seize vehicles and PA equipment they believe is destined for a dance. Jenkins again: "Police stopped our lorry. When I got there my brother was being punched and kicked. I objected and was thrown straight on to me back, hit me head on the tarmac."

The lorry keys had been thrown into the hedge, so the police sent for a tow truck. "There was half-hour waiting for the convoy or the tow truck to come. Then came the charge of the light brigade – maybe a thousand people in cars. They all knew the score – get out of the cars, keys out, up to the front, to even-up the negotiations, to bring some reason up there. I asked the Sergeant what right they had to steal our equipment. He couldn't tell us, because they had no right. Their vehicles were blocking our way, so we asked them to move them, or we'd move them. They moved them. We always made sure that no one broke this policy of massive but passive non-violent resistance. It worked every time."

Exodus isn't only a party organisation. The dances have helped rehouse 29 young people in a derelict old people's home on the outskirts of Luton. It was originally squatted, then licensed and rented from Luton Borough Council. Money from the PA went into repairs. And one of the early party venues was Long Meadow Farm, purchased by the Department of Transport (DoT) for the M1 widening programme, then left to rot. After the party, Exodus squatted the farm and bungalow. It offered rent to the DoT which gave Exodus a lease. Since then, using money from the dances, free pallets, and great graft, the place has been transformed. There's goats and sheep and carthorses and two pot-bellied pigs who behave like a couple of love lettuces, playing hide-and-seek in the straw. A forge is being built for Guy, Exodus member and farrier; and a cafe, The Pukka Cuppa. In September the World Community farm will open to local school parties, for free. Rosemary Davis, Headmistress of Luton's Ferrars Infant School, has visited it. "There are no other facilities like this round here. It's a unique experience. I'm very impressed."

Then there's the big dream, the Community Centre. Exodus has developed a detailed business plan, based on 30 dances a year at a £5 entrance fee, which at 80 per cent capacity would bring in £360,000. As well as the dances it plans a market, workshops, bar and cafe, theatre, recording studio and counselling and education services. "It'd be extremely beneficial for the young people of Luton," affirmed Chief Inspector Brown. "It would give them an interest, opportunities for education and work." But the big dream nearly turned bad.

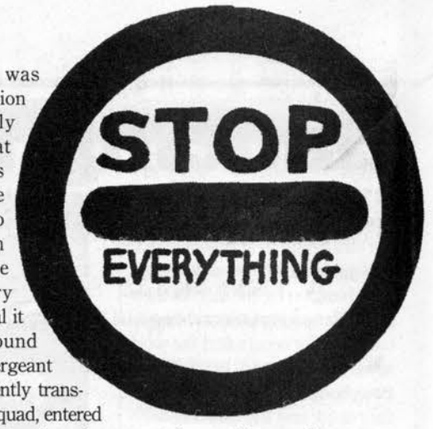
At 8pm on Saturday January 30 1993, police raided Long Meadow Farm and seized Exodus' equipment. Thirty six people were arrested and taken to Luton police station. By 2am the next morning, 4,000 people had surrounded the station and were demanding everybody was released and the equipment returned. They even set up a sound system on the street to dance their displeasure. The police were taken by surprise. Everybody was later released without charge, save for a caution for herbal cannabis. A written promise was given to return the PA. The crowd dispersed peacefully. Chief Inspector Brown: "The crowd left the demonstration with some panache. They tidied up and put their rubbish in bags. I thought that was quite a nice touch really."

Chief Inspector Brown was not consulted. He only knew of the raid an hour before it happened. "I was rather put on the spot. There was no time to question the decision." When asked why there had been a change of policy, he replied: "I heard a number of MPs had written to the Chief Constable saying this should stop, that the police ought to get on the case. At about the time the decision was made to pull the plug on negotiations, there were some MPs advocating drastic measures." Graham Bright, John Major's Parliamentary Private Secretary, is MP for Luton South and author of *The Bright Bill* imposing large fines for unlicensed events. He was quoted in the *Luton News* supporting the police measures and saying he hoped people "would be prosecuted to the maximum". *New Statesman & Society* tried to contact Bright and Luton North MP John Carlisle, but they have failed to respond to the calls. Labour county councillor John Jefferson, at that time a member of the Bedfordshire Police Committee, claims: "I was getting information from Police Headquarters from disillusioned police officers. Some very senior officers were totally disgusted by the way the situation had been turned around."

The Monday after the raid a local district council contacted the police offering a warehouse for licensed venues. Exodus was not informed. The owner of an Edmonton club, The Roller Express, also offered his premises. He says: "I was warned off by my local police. I was threatened with losing my licence if there was the slightest trouble."

Far from informing Exodus of the alternative licensed venue, Bedfordshire police carried out two further major operations at the Exodus dance assembly points, blocking off roads, Exodus says, ambushing, provoking violence and "noising it up". The police say they were preventing a breach of the peace and enforcing an injunction against unlicensed parties. This was only taken out after the January 30 raid. The legality of these operations was at best dubious, the reported cost: £103,000. Exodus says that it was assembling to protest against the ban, not for a dance. The PA never left the farm. Apart from licensing offences, out of 32 criminal charges arising from these and other incidents, there's been one conviction – the sentence: £80.

The timing here is crucial. Police operations against Exodus received shock horror national coverage. Yet they were clearly unnecessary. Exodus wasn't told about the warehouse. Chief Inspector Brown's efforts were sidelined. And a month later the Home Secretary announced new police powers to stop raves. The day after this announcement Luton MP John Carlisle greeted the proposals in the House of Commons: "We have had to ask local forces to be on standby so that police can stop a rave before it takes place or go in and break it up. That is why I particularly welcome the statement from my right honourable and learned friend the Home Secretary." Who are "we"? Exodus believes, and I agree, that the police carried out the operations against it under political pressure and against the wishes of officers on the ground. The consequent publicity was then useful as additional justification for the introduction of the new powers to stop raves. It was a set-up, not so much a conscious conspiracy, more an agreement amongst like-minded people in power. According to Chief Inspector Brown: "There was a belief that Exodus wore horns and pointed tails."



John Carlisle made another comment about Exodus: "The popular conception is that drugs are sold and the profits used to finance the organisation." Whose popular conception?

On February 13, Paul Taylor, the most prominent black Exodus member was charged with possession with intent to supply ecstasy tabs valued at £2,200, a charge he has always denied. The ecstasy was said to have been found in Taylor's room at the farmhouse on January 30. During Taylor's trial it emerged that, at around 9.15pm, a Detective Sergeant Clements, no 1313, recently transferred to Luton drugs squad, entered the farmhouse with a torch – the electricity had been cut. Police notebooks show that he stayed inside for 13 minutes, came out, then went back in again with PC Redfern, on his first day with the drugs squad. Within two minutes, at 9.30pm, PC Redfern, guided by DS Clements' torch, had found two separate caches of drugs in Taylor's room, one in a coffee tin, one in his bag. "Bingo," defence barrister James Wood remarked to the jury. "This case stinks, it stinks of a plot". The jury agreed, and acquitted Taylor. Taylor is suing the police.

"The charge against Paul Taylor was part of a policy to smash our organisation, because it was capable of standing up for itself," Glenn Jenkins believes. "It was a plant. Those charges were part of a package designed to suggest that we were here to conspire to sell drugs."

Chief Inspector Brown cannot believe that officers would plant drugs. But he is categoric about the results of the intelligence-gathering operation he organised before entering into negotiations with Exodus. "There is no evidence that Exodus or Glenn or Rich or Paul Taylor were selling drugs at the raves."

Exodus is now applying for planning permission on a warehouse in Luton for its community centre. Luton Borough Council has already granted it several public entertainment licences for events, family fun days and all-night dances, which have all gone off without problems. The Labour-controlled Council deserves high praise for putting its reputation on the line. Tories on the Council opposed the licenses. Luton police initially opposed the licences but have recently undergone yet another change of heart. "I now know a little bit more about Exodus than I probably did at the time," Chief Superintendent Alan Marlow from Luton division told me recently. "So if we were starting again from scratch I might not necessarily be making the same sort of objections." Marlow has now taken early retirement from the force. Chief Inspector Brown has been transferred to a desk job in management services. If he's been given stick for talking so frankly, I want to know why. He was just trying to keep the peace like the "pukka copper" he is.

"It's about time the politicians stopped talking bollocks and told the people the truth about work." Glenn Jenkins has the last word. "There's no future for a lot of people in the present set-up. So people need something else. The system needs to assist us to diversify. We're on a mission. We're at the cutting edge of an answer. It could even be a solution to the decay of Britain plc." ✦

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National demonstration against the Criminal Justice Bill on Sunday October 9. Assemble at 12 noon outside Embankment tube station.

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