

The Exodus dance collective holds peaceful parties and wants to cooperate with the police. Yet thousands of youngsters will soon be criminalised, reports **Tim Malyon**

Raving injustice

The Woodside industrial estate, near Dunstable, is dead at night, warehouses silent, no houses nearby. But around midnight every other Saturday it's the place to be for Bedfordshire youth. Last week, there were 2,000-3,000 people waiting patiently, cars nose to tail on both sides of the road and filling the car parks. It's loud but orderly, the whole show marshalled by Bigs and his merry band of lieutenants. "Ye kaan park there, that's dangerous, man, pull over, you wanna cause some kin'e of accident?" Bigs is a "dread". You don't disobey him, but his heart is gold.

Bigs' "real" name is Paul Taylor. He's from Exodus, the Luton dance and squatting collective. Exodus' community farm was raided in January 1993 and all its equipment seized. Police claimed to have found ecstasy tabs valued at £2,200. Bigs was found not guilty earlier this year of possession with intent to supply.

Supporters claim that police planted the drugs as part of a series of police operations (see *NSS*, 24 June) costing over £100,000, which, if successful, would have stopped the dances and destroyed the collective. A senior serving police officer, chief inspector Mike Brown, who was negotiating with Exodus for licensed venues, has said there was political pressure on the police to "get on the case". He was given an hour's notice of the change of policy from negotiation to confrontation, "jaw jaw" being turned into "war war", as he put it.

Exodus survived, not least because 4,000 supporters surrounded Luton police station after the raid on the farm, demanding the release of those arrested and the return of their equipment. Now Exodus is back, busy putting on what it calls "demonstrations of the need for parties". There has been a dearth of parties and festivals this year, especially of the free variety. Most police forces have been keeping a strict eye out for anything but the smallest and best-hidden "dos", seizing PA equipment and turning back punters as though the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill, which will outlaw such events, was in force already.

Around 12.45am, the Blue Star taxi firm brings the word to Woodside. Lee is driving. He's a dead ringer for George Michael and has been helping Exodus stay mobile free of charge since the parties began. People wander back to their cars, engines fire up, and we're off, headed by the Exodus Land-Rover, green with a bright red star on the bonnet. From the back of the Land-Rover, at a steady 30 miles an hour, it's an extraordinary sight, headlights stretching endlessly into the distance. Police sources reckoned the convoy to be more than

300 cars long. Someone said to me at the 24 July anti-Criminal Justice Bill demonstration: "You can't oppose oppression by dancing." Yet there's the reply, lined out behind the jeep. Dance mobilises youth in huge numbers. As Billy Bragg puts it, "Dance gives people a sense of community, a sense of togetherness that's lacking in our society."

The Land-Rover indicates left, pulls up by the entrance to a narrow track, and Bigs jumps down, starting to wave people in almost before his feet touch the ground. The car behind has been briefed where to lead the convoy so no roads are blocked, and the track is kept open in case of any emergencies. A smartly dressed, white-haired man turns in. Bigs asks him if he's going to the dance. He shakes his head, evidently confused as to how he ended up in a traffic jam at one o'clock in the morning. Bigs makes space for him to get back out again.

Up the lane, the outline of a circular sandpit gradually emerges from the darkness, 500 metres across, surrounded by trees, cars parked on the far side, people settling into the dance on the near side. Glenn Jenkins is on the mike, Exodus spokesperson rapping to the tribal beat: "*Public order section five/Government ready to take a dive/All tribes out there comin' alive.*" There are at least 3,000 people out here, at the third party since Exodus restarted. And that's without advertising, just a message a few days before on one phone line—the bush telegraph.

What is happening here in Bedfordshire focuses the spotlight on the massive potential enforcement problems of the Criminal Justice Bill. "Thousands of Bedfordshire's young people are regularly doing something now that in three months time will make them criminals," explains Jenkins. "We want discussions held with the police and the council to show that imposition of this bill by force to stop the parties would be madness. What we're proposing is sanctioned gatherings, places where free parties and festivals can be held in accord with the authorities. This is a real opportunity for an accord, rather than imprisoning and criminalising people. We want Bedfordshire to be an anti-Criminal Justice Bill zone." Exodus is also waiting for planning permission on a large warehouse owned by P&O where it plans to establish a community centre and hold fortnightly licensed dances in winter. This would help build up equipment for the free outdoor parties, more stalls, a fire engine. Exodus is more aware of safety considerations than most commercial outfits I've seen.

The Bedfordshire police have already tried



de facto to implement the Criminal Justice Bill through their previous operations against Exodus, blocking roads, trying to seize equipment and ban parties before they've begun. They stopped the parties for a while, but not the demand. And their actions are now being severely criticised. Exodus' local Labour county councillor John Jefferson put a motion for "a full public inquiry into the Bedfordshire police's activities against members of the Exodus collective" to the Bedfordshire Police Committee. Despite Labour and Liberal Democrat support, the committee's magistrate members voted with the Tories to defeat it. Jefferson is now taking his motion to a full county council meeting.

Exodus is insistent on an inquiry. "The police have got to be made answerable so what they've done doesn't happen again," says Jenkins. He is suspicious of recent police appointments, moving hard-line officers into positions previously occupied by officers keen to negotiate solutions. An attempt by *NSS* to obtain an interview with Bedfordshire Chief Constable Alan Dyer was at first agreed and then refused. When we asked Dyer about current policy towards Exodus parties, he pleaded ignorance to the fact that they were even happening.

Meanwhile, at the entrance to the dance, Bigs is giving two local police "some lyrics" for trying to drive in without asking. They are invited to come in on foot, on their own or accompanied, "for a cup of tea", but they refuse. As they drive off, a barrel-chested figure on a bicycle swoops out of the darkness, says he's local and has heard "faint music". He disappears up the track to see what is happening, to re-emerge about an hour later. His name is David Taylor, an ex-policeman, now a fish merchant. He stays chatting for over an hour and leaves his phone number. He has a policeman's eye for detail.

"I didn't feel at any time intimidated or frightened," he tells me. "It was very orderly—they even had a post with a red cross on it. There was no menace, no idiots running about causing aggravation. And I didn't see any dealing. There were some very young girls wandering around, but I think they were quite safe. I got the feeling that the people at the gate could deal with any situation that arose. They were running it very profession-



Dance stance: will plain clothes police officers ever be able to match this look?

"Even though they think they're bold/We know they're cold like ice with fear . . ."

The air feels fresh, the haze of dry red sand stirred up by stamping feet washed away. Suddenly there's a flash and a great clap of thunder. The crowd goes bananas. ". . . And we are F-I-R-E."

"When we say 'they' we're talking government," explains Jenkins, a former train driver and Aslef shop steward. This transformation from union organiser to Exodus spokesperson gives him a unique insight into both old and new politics. "We know they're worried, even though they give an impression of confidence. The fire is the power of resistance of sound systems allied to community groups like us. We're going to melt their Criminal Injustice law."

Exodus is proposing a "blueprint for civic peace" in Bedfordshire, a Criminal Justice Bill-free zone. Jenkins elaborates. "By the time the Criminal Justice Bill comes into force, we hope to have been involved in negotiations not just with our local police force, but with Liberty, local councillors and MPs. We want to have a big round-table discussion on this issue. The government's proposals for making us criminals and forcing the police into confrontation again can't be in anyone's interests. To do anything else when young people could be criminalised and have their heads cracked is criminal."

Jenkins' argument is especially strong given the recommendations of the government's Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. In a suppressed report recently leaked to Duncan Campbell of the *Guardian*, the council said: "We believe there are dangers in over-regulation and in resorting to the criminal law, which may well lead to conflict between young people and the authorities. We recommend that the organisation of more legal raves be encouraged by local authorities exercising maximum discretion in the granting of licences, and by involving responsible organisers of raves in the process."

I bumped into Eggy by the gate at dawn, 18 years old and wearing a legalise cannabis T-shirt. A year ago he came to live at the derelict old people's home that Exodus had squatted. They have a council licence to occupy it now, as they do for the community farm. Thirty people live there, with money from the dances being used to pay for repairs. Eggy used to be in the army cadets. He's called Eggy because that's how his shaved skull used to look. I've heard what he says repeated in hundreds of different ways by hundreds of different people up and down the country. Most politicians haven't heard it. Most newspaper editors haven't heard it. But among the coalition of groups protesting against the Criminal Justice Bill, the road protesters, travellers, squatters and ravers, the word is spreading swiftly. "If they put through this Criminal Justice Bill thing, then everyone will rebel. I'm going to watch it, see our freedom come. In this way, the Criminal Justice Bill is positive, it's beautiful." Standing in the half light, I ask Eggy what this is all for, the parties, Exodus, the struggles. "We're doing it to save the youth, to save the people," he insists.

ally. Although I found the music crap."

Returning home the next day, he asked around fellow villagers, whom police say reported noise complaints. Two local newspapers reported "a flood of calls" and "a storm of protest" from local residents. The district council has received six complaints. Area environmental health officer Janet Wallace, who was called out by the police, says "there was a noise nuisance", that in some 70 houses was "unacceptably loud, like listening to your neighbour's barbecue". She says the site was left "scrupulously clean" and that there was no further disturbance to the area.

David Taylor's experience bicycling round the area that night was somewhat different. "The people in the village had no idea it was going on. It was just something faint coming from somewhere, nobody knew where. We live eight miles from Woburn, where people like Tina Turner and Neil Diamond play. You can hear those. If you'd said to anybody, me included, before it happened, that there was going to be 3,000-4,000 people coming to your village tonight for a big party, you'd immediately think, I'm going to get my car broken into, my house burgled, there's going to be spaced out junkies everywhere. It's fear of the unknown."

I asked Taylor about the anti-rave provisions of the Criminal Justice Bill. "If I want to have 200 people turn up on my land and do whatever, I should be allowed to do it. You should be allowed to do anything you want that really can't be construed as detrimental to people's well-being in the near vicinity." Taylor's final comment is disturbing given his first-hand knowledge of the police: "Before long, everybody will get nicked. I can just see it, busloads of police, wading in, crash helmets, big night sticks, a few dogs. Because at the moment, Exodus is one up on the police—not so much one up, but I think the police would think that."

DJ Hazard is playing in the sandpit, tribal beats shaking bodies and minds. Bigs has finished his marshalling duties at the gate and is on the microphone. He's quoting lyrics from Lynton Kwesi Johnson. It starts to rain. Tarpaulins are swiftly hung over the decks and PA.

INFLUENCES



JOHN BIFFEN

Conservative MP for North Shropshire

What books and authors have had the greatest influence on your political beliefs?

A History of Modern Times by D M Ketelby; *The Origins of the First*

World War by S B Fay; and *Story of Mankind* by H Van Loon. Ketelby and Van Loon I read as a schoolboy. They were packed with facts that I absorbed with an enthusiasm that was otherwise reserved for Somerset cricket. S B Fay was required reading at Cambridge, where I studied the origins of the first world war. The topic has haunted and fascinated me ever since.

Name one book, one play, one poem, and one song or piece of music that you would most like everyone to see, read or hear.

Book: George Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

Play: Christopher Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*.

Poem: *Fire and Ice* by Robert Frost.

Music: Berlioz's *Symphonie Fantastique*; Sibelius' *Finlandia*; and the score to the musical *Salad Days*.

In the early stages of your life, which figures stand out as an important influence on you?

J F Lawrence and G Vaughan Jones, who taught me history and English at Dr Morgan's School, Bridgwater (now Haygrove Comprehensive); and my parents.

What event during your lifetime has had the greatest effect on your political beliefs?

The passage of the European Communities Act 1972 and its subsequent challenge by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the tentative emergence of a new balance of European power. I have lived through exciting times and thoroughly enjoyed it.

Which political figures do you most admire?

Enoch Powell and Charles de Gaulle.

If you could visit any time in history for 24 hours, which would you choose?

The battle of Sedgemoor, 1685—hopefully to discover that my forebears fought with Monmouth against James II.

What do you consider the greatest threat at present to individual freedom and liberty?

The relentless pursuit of single-issue lobbying.

On important matters, whose opinion—other than your own—do you trust most?

Those of my wife and my association chairman.

Who is the greatest prime minister we never had?

Enoch Powell, who combines matchless courage and integrity.

If you could pass one law, what would it be?

To require that all European Union law is applicable to the United Kingdom *only* with the affirmative consent of parliament. This would unlock the process whereby European cooperation would be based upon the nation-states, perceptively described by de Gaulle as "the only entities with right to give orders and the power to be obeyed".