

The Public Order Act: Defining Political Uniform in 1930s Britain

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In a 1933 speech reported in the press as ‘The Age of Shirts’, G. K. Chesterton sought to rationalise a newly-emerging sight on the streets of British cities. ‘It occurs to me’, he said, ‘that what is happening to-day has always happened at intervals in human history. There are moments when a civilisation begins to stagger and grow bewildered.’ He explained, ‘People rush about. They form groups. They wear peculiar kinds of shirts.’ (‘Gossip of the Day’, 1933: 10). To Chesterton, the formation of political sects defined by distinctive attire was part of an enduring tradition. Another contemporary summary exploring the rise of uniforms on the streets of Britain found historical parallels in centuries-old European battle narratives: ‘During the English Civil Wars Cavaliers and Roundheads were easily distinguished by their clothing’, it was noted. Equally, the same report observed that the white roses of the Houses of Lancaster and York operated by dressed distinction.; the coloured shirts of the Camisards in the religious wars in France under Louis XIV and the red blouses of Garibaldi’s troops during the Italian wars of liberation were also name-checked (*Meetings, Uniforms and Public Order*, 1937: 6). Yet, while such approaches positioned the street skirmishes of the 1930s as part of a predictable continuity, many others including Members of Parliament felt that the rise of organised violence between rival political groups in clashing bodies as well as shirts required new interventions for new times. These debates crystallised in the passing of the British Public Order Act of 1936, which, in its opening salvo, banned the wearing of political uniform in public places. The Act still stands.

Under the auspices of the Act political uniform was never clearly defined; indeed, the core difficulty of articulating its object was a central point of contention in the formation of the initial Bill and its later implementation as law. As such, the Act offers a pertinent focus for exploring the challenges and limits for understanding uniform as a category more broadly. While the Act was partly structured to dismantle the ascendant power of the British Union of Fascists (‘the Blackshirts’)

by attacking a central aspect of their collective identity, the ruling also had a wider knock-on effect on other 'shirted' organisations of diverse purposes, resulting in a variety of legal outcomes tested through telling court cases. This essay examines the broader purposes of the Act and its wider reaches and explores in particular the opposing fortunes of two lesser-known green-shirted organisations that came under the Act's radar. Drawing on parliamentary reports, Home Office correspondence, institutional literature and press reaction, the essay explores the philosophical debates that played out around the meaning of uniform at the formation of the Act, the creative clothing strategies employed in reaction to the ban and the legacy of the Act on political organisations in the present day.

A 'foreign force'

The emergence of coloured shirts as the dress choice for a novel form of political street action was observed from the early 1930s; some contemporary observers even considered it to be a part of the experience of urban modernity alongside trends for sport, the emergence of high-speed transport and electric light (Coupland 2004: 101). The British Union of Fascists, formed in October 1932 and led by Sir Oswald Mosley adopted from the outset the black shirt that had been made emblematic of Italian fascist politics by Benito Mussolini from the early 1920s. Initially in a design that buttoned at the neck and shoulder, the striking garment was frequently likened to a fencing shirt. Especially when combined with a high black belt, tight black leggings and angled black beret, it undoubtedly signalled the group's ambitions to become a 'trained and disciplined force' (Coupland 2004: 100-1). Although, as noted above, a variety of British historic groupings with political intentions had long expressed allegiance through collective garb, in the 1930s this particular manifestation of political uniform was largely seen as a continental import. As will be shown, discussion in the press often highlighted the emergence of political uniforms as un-British in character; a by-product of foreign feeling and method. Alongside Italians in black shirts, brown-shirted German National Socialists were becoming familiar sights in news media. As such, the green,

blue and red shirted uniformed campaign groups on home territory were considered alien in the first attempts to legislate against them.

In his 1934 effort to introduce a bill of prohibition, Commander Locker-Lampson stated, 'The appearance of uniforms in British public life must mean the gradual extinction of government by consent, and the substitution of government by coercion'. It was 'this new spirit of foreign force in our affairs' that the Bill was meant to counter ('Party Uniforms', 1934: 7). Despite the precedent set by Holland, Switzerland and Sweden in introducing similar bans, it was not until 1936 that such a Bill was approved in Britain. Regular street violence during the autumn of that year including the famous battle for Cable Street where black-shirted fascist groups attempted to forcibly process through the Jewish East End of London and were met by a major counter-offensive, resulted in unprecedented and unsustainable levels of policing. Public meetings and political speakers on the streets frequently finished in physical fights. 'Political organisations', the euphemistic term mostly intended to describe fascist and communist formations, were increasingly adopting highly organised tactics. Marching bands, drum corps and uniformed parades with flags created a quasi-military aesthetic that sometimes functioned as a front for political violence. As one contemporary source put it:

The rise of bodies trained to act with military precision, which might even in time, through their influence over the undisciplined masses and the glamour which their uniforms and public display shed around them, make an attempt to seize power in the State by revolutionary means, perhaps by the use of armed force, seemed to reasonable and moderate men of all parties to call for suppression at the very outset (*Meetings, Uniforms and Public Order*, 1937: 4)

Early attempts at enforcing a ban were thrown out by the force of counter-arguments, including the risk, noted by Lord Winterton, that it might represent 'the greatest possible advertisement for Sir Oswald Mosley's movement', resulting in 'cheap ready-made martyrdom' ('Party Uniforms', 1934:7). As will be discussed below, parliamentary debates raised core concerns:

the need to create a wider principle would mean that other smaller uniformed organisations who posed no threat to public order would be outlawed alongside those that the Act was designed to hit hardest. There was also the fundamental and thorny issue of how political uniform might be defined.

‘Seven shades of shirt’

Although the Public Order Act was drafted to deal with serious acts of violence and disorder, the fact that its first clause dealt with matters of clothing meant that some of the parliamentary and press discussions adopted a playful tone about its possible execution. For example, Commander Locker-Lampson’s statement that he did not want to prohibit the wearing of shirts, or as the press put it that ‘he did not want people to go about in singlets’ (*‘Party Uniforms’*, 1934: 7) provided much amusement in the House. Satirical writers also made great play with the Act’s comic potential, including its legislation against particular colours. ‘Richardson’, in the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, wrote of the palette:

Quite a number of organisations in this country can now be identified by the distinctive colour of the shirts chosen by members. [...] This distinctive coloured shirt idea is a good one – it is nice to be able to see, at a glance, a man’s political opinions, and avoid getting a sock on the ear for saying the wrong thing – and there is sure to be a run on the few remaining colours. There are not many left, and they are rapidly being snapped up. The Purple Shirt Publicans has already been reserved, while it is only a matter of days before we hear of Tangerine Shirt Tram-drivers, the Ultramarine Shirt Unitarians, the Brown Shirt Bookbinders and the Orange Shirt Organ-grinders (*‘Gossip of the Day’*, 1933: 10).

Another columnist, writing for the *Dundee Courier*, noted, ‘Red shirts provoke bulls and Conservatives; blue shirts provoke Socialists and Communists; green shirts are certain to inflame Orangemen; and orange shirts bring out the worst that is in Celtic Hibernian nature. Nothing is safe but what the artists call the broken colours’ (*‘What is a Uniform?’* 1937: 4).

The Star newspaper delineated ‘seven shades of shirt’ worn in Britain by political organisations in November 1936. These were black shirts by the British Union of Fascists and the Imperial Fascist League; blue by the Kensington Fascists (an off-shoot of the BUF), grey by the United Empire Fascist Party; red by the Independent Labour Party Guild of Youth; green by Social Credit economic reformers; brown (khaki) by Communist Youth organisations, and white ‘by a political body in Manchester’ (in *Meetings, Uniforms and Public Order* 1937: 7). In Home Office internal documentation a clutch of blacklisted organisations, pre-designated as both political and uniformed, was the Act’s first formal target. Their overlapping list of groups included the British Union of Fascists, the Imperial Fascist League, the Italian Fascisti, the Social Credit Party, the Young Communist League, Young Pioneers (a children’s organisation within the Communist Party), the Independent Labour Party Guild of Youth, and the Legion of Blue and White Shirts (an anti-Fascist and anti-Communist Jewish organisation). Each of these groups was written to in advance of the Act becoming law, and the Secretary of State advised that any person publicly wearing uniform signifying his association with those organisations ‘should be regarded by the Police as offending against the prohibition in Section 1 of the Act’ (Home Office, 1936: 2).

Some groups responded to say that the Act did not apply to them as they had disbanded, in the case of the Young Pioneers (Gollan, 1936); they were non-political, in the case of the Italian Fascists, who claimed to be involved only in ‘benevolent and social work’ (Camagna, 1936); or that their garments were not a uniform but an outfit worn for ‘rambles, for sports purposes, and on week-end outings’, in the case of the Independent Labour Party Guild of Youth (Brockway, 1936). Surprisingly, others expressed gratitude for the ruling. For example, the Imperial Fascist League wrote to the Commissioner of Police to thank him: ‘so many of our members are unable to afford to buy the uniforms we had to adopt to compete with other bodies’. They added that they were loath to shatter the Home Secretary’s illusions that they were a uniformed body and requested that the Commissioner ‘keep this aspect “dark”’ (Ridout, 1936). Among those who did not deny their political purpose and valued their uniform as part of their propaganda purpose, there was understandable

anxiety about the detail of the prohibition. How could satisfactory adaptations be made to keep a collective identity but remain on the right side of the law? What constituted a political uniform, exactly? Frustratingly, there was no definition given.

‘Vaguely Nebulous’

In the frivolous spirit noted above, members of the House of Parliament grappled with the lexicon of clothing. While failing to take it seriously, they nonetheless acknowledged its slippery, polysemic character. As one unnamed contributor to parliamentary discussions is reported to have stated, ‘It was impossible to lay down a hard and fast rule as to when garments ended and uniforms began’ (‘Kilt is not under political uniform ban’, 1936: 5).

Must a uniform be a complete outfit? Would a tie with political insignia count? What about a rosette, badge, armband, sash? What about ceremonial regalia? Is traditional dress worn by a Scottish nationalist campaigning for Home Rule a political uniform? Must a political uniform be a formal dress shirt? And what was to be done about ‘ladies who wore black blouses out of sympathy with the leader of the Fascists’ (‘Parliamentary Sketch’, 1936: 9)? At times the lack of certainty seemed to smack of a failure of nerve. The Attorney-General likened uniform to an elephant: you can’t define it, but you know what it is when you see it (*Meetings, Uniforms and Public Order*, 1937: 10). This side-step meant that magistrates must decide in court if ‘striped hatbands, monocles of blue glass, or large iron rings in their noses’ could constitute political apparel on the wrong side of the law (*Meetings, Uniforms and Public Order*, 1937: 9).

Although there was some frustration by prosecutors that the Act was ‘vaguely nebulous’ on its central point (‘Political Uniform Test Case’, 1937: 5), there was also some admiration for the deliberately perverse strategy. *Bystander* journalist A. G. Macdonell celebrated it as a ‘characteristically British’ piece of common sense. ‘It is a perfectly good way out of a difficult legal technicality’ he added (1936: 271). The deliberately open-ended response was also a pre-emptive

strike to counter the 'ingenious devices' that had been deployed by the Nazis when their uniform had been prohibited by German authorities. It was noted that they simply changed their allegiance to a new form of hat or buttonhole flower (*Meetings, Uniforms and Public Order*, 1937: 10). After much deliberation, in the final detail of the Act, it was given to the Courts to decide on a case-by-case basis. In the absence of a statutory definition, magistrates were to refer to the 'ordinary meaning' of the term in everyday usage. 'It appears from the definition given in standard dictionaries', the Home Office advised police, that "'uniform" connotes some dress or at any rate the substantial part of some dress'. Further, 'the dress or part of the dress must be distinctive of, and peculiar to, the class of persons wearing it' (Home Office, 1936: 1). The Act allowed maximum flexibility, but there were inevitably many grey areas.

'Suppressing the Rainbow'

Parliamentary debate on the Public Order Bill on 23 November and 7 December 1936 resolved that a uniform need not comprise a full set of garments. Singular items could be considered; a tie alone would not be considered uniform, but a shirt might. Certain shirts, however, were considered more uniform than others. Some of these rulings were convenient for the British Union of Fascists, who drew on the preparatory discussions of the Attorney General and the Home Secretary in the House of Commons. They hung in particular onto the following words that seemed to allow fascists to continue to sport a distinctive livery: 'If in future they merely wear a black shirt and otherwise wear diverse clothes, some flannels, other corduroys, and so on, it is most improbable that any Court will hold that they are wearing a Blackshirt' (quoted in Francis-Hawkins, 1936). The BUF saw a way to keep a form of black shirt through this concession, supported by the fact that similar garments, in their words, 'can be bought in any shop, and have been worn for long past by some members of the public in no way associated with this organisation' (Francis-Hawkins, 1937). In a seeming contradiction, however, the Commissioner of Police in London told Independent Labour Party members that the red shirts and blouses of the Guild of Youth would be treated as a breach of

the law (Brockway, 1936). Here, the wearing of coloured shirts as ideological devices was also confused by their rising popularity as everyday wear in interwar fashion. As a journalist for the *Evening News* noted in 1933, 'Red Shirts have become very popular. In one sense they have become too popular. Red shirts are being sold to the general public in such large numbers that they are not so distinctive as a political badge as they used to be. Some shirt shops in the West End look like branches of the Guild of Youth. They aren't of course' ('The Age of "Shirts"': 7).

In a gesture of leniency, the Act allowed the wearing of political emblems on ordinary clothes to escape the definition of uniform. It also permitted the wearing of political uniform for special occasions (although special dispensation needed to be granted, and Home Office records for 1937 show that most requests, especially those by the British Union of Fascists, were denied). The wearing of uniform by non-political groups continued. For the purposes of the Act, the latter included uniformed organisations 'such as the Salvation Army, the Boy Scouts, the Church Lads' Brigade, Commissionaires, hospital nurses, and other similar bodies' (Home Office, 1936: 1). Many of these groupings had the additional protection of the Chartered Associations (Protection of Names and Uniforms) Act of 1926 which permitted designated members to wear a formally recognised set of garments and insignia; this applied, for example, to St John's Ambulance, Girl Guides and Boy Scouts. While some of the groups considered non-political might seem to have distinctive ideological aims and purposes sometimes informed by a religious, imperialist or military ethos, the term 'political' in the Act was largely applied to formal party political groupings rather than leisure and occupational organisations. While this was an attempt to designate different organisations as eligible or otherwise for prosecution, in practice there were issues of clarity demonstrated by the protracted internal discussions within the Home Office files about whether disparate organisations - from the Labour Party Male Voice Choir and the Loyal Orange Institution to the Quaker Land Corps of agricultural volunteers – could come under the Act's jurisdiction. What was and was not political was arrived at with a similar fuzziness to the Act's other avoidances. In a court case following the Act's

passage into law, the case for the defence put it, 'the word "political" is as difficult to define as the word "uniform"' ('R. v. Taylor, Hawthorn, Ward', 1937: 6).

With the passing of the Act on 1 January 1937, however, prosecutions followed almost immediately. Some cases seemed cut-and-dried. The BUF, for example, abandoned their stylised fencing garb but their sympathisers continued to dress in ordinary black garments, sometimes decorated with fascist insignia. Within a month of the Act's passing, a man was arrested in Leeds for selling copies of the BUF newspaper, *Action*, while wearing a peaked cap with two BUF cap badges, a black shirt and black tie. While he argued that he was selling a newspaper and was thus merely identifying himself as a news vendor rather than a party member, the court were not convinced. During his prosecution, the fascist complained, 'What about the Green Shirts with their green berets?' ('Political Uniform Test Case', 1937:5) Those who wore green shirts on the streets of 1930s Britain were a complicated case, and their fortunes were more varied than those of the Blackshirts. As such, they offer a lesser-known but rich narrative of uniform and its complex trajectories and purposes.

'The Lilywhite Boys, Clothed all in Green-O'

Carrying drums, banners and flags, green-shirted brigades marched in synchronised formation around Britain's urban centres on a regular basis in the 1930s. Smartly turned out, and including women as well as men, the group had an original repertoire of rousing songs and striking insignia. Sometimes cryptic in meaning, their banners variously read, 'Would the Maggot Starve because the Apple was too Big?' and 'Demand the Wages of the Machine!' Their visual fashioning and declamatory addresses shared a quasi-military style with the fascists, but their politics were wholly opposed.

The Green Shirt movement for Social Credit, later the Social Credit Party of Great Britain and Ireland (1935-1951), campaigned for radical economic reform in a period of deep financial crisis.

They espoused the Social Credit system of Major C. H. Douglas, a complex form of economic redistribution that included the payment of a National Dividend to every citizen and the welcoming in of a leisure society. Global finance was the enemy for these reformers, who saw the money system as a corrupt and mystifying force conspiring to introduce scarcity in an age of plenty. The methods of the group were in some ways conventional for campaigners of the period including the production of printed literature, the delivery of rousing speeches from street rostrums and banner-laden parades. However, in other ways they were highly idiosyncratic. The group burned effigies of the Governor of the Bank of England, dressed as robots to show the potential for mechanised labour, and threw painted bricks through the windows of 10 and 11 Downing Street (Drakeford, 1997; Pollen 2015). These agit-prop techniques were supported by highly invested organisational signs including a double K 'key' symbol, said to signify the twin aims that the group wished to unlock – prosperity and leisure - and a green shirt.

While economics was a pressing topic for all social reformers responding to the new conditions of the 1930s, the Social Credit system was a distinctive contribution to the mix. It was underpinned by a complex mathematical formula that few could understand, but for those intrigued enough to want to know more it was far from clear why an economic system should be promoted through ritualised performances, a songbook of original folksongs, the carrying of blazing torches and a uniformed presence. For those with longer memories, however, the background of the organisation's leader helped explain certain symbols and styles. John Hargrave, the charismatic podium speaker and the chief orchestrator of the Social Credit Party's visual aesthetic and public methods was a novelist, illustrator and longstanding layout man for an advertising agency. Highly knowledgeable about persuasion and propaganda through his professional experience at the cutting edge of commercial techniques, he also knew first-hand what made a compelling leader, having first risen to second-in-command in the Boy Scouts in the 1910s, and then to the head of his own organisation, the Kindred of the Kibbo Kift, from 1920. A decade as at the helm of a green shirted

‘youth group for all ages’ had honed his interest in social reform techniques that incorporated pageantry and collective participation, mysticism and personal magnetism (Pollen, 2015).

Kibbo Kift, whose name meant ‘proof of strength’, started life as a pacifist splinter group from the Scouts, but from the outset their covenant required members to commit to campaigns for personal mental, physical and spiritual fitness, and for social, educational and economic reform, alongside global ambitions for world government and world peace. With high-profile support from leading figures in the arts and sciences but with a membership only a few hundred strong, the daily practices at Kibbo Kift meetings and camps were a blend of self-developmental primitivist practices adapted from the roots of scouting and hands-on political actions including child-centred education, craft manufacture and anti-war demonstrations. At all events, a specific costume had to be worn. Hargrave had a keen sense of personal style and a wide knowledge of avant-garde design. As such, Kibbo Kift wardrobes variously included priestly robes and scanty exercise attire – always homemade. The core camping and hiking kit was, importantly, all in green [Fig 1]. Men wore green jerkins and shorts, a combination of a Native American hunting shirt upper with the bottom half of the scouts. Drama was provided through the addition of green pointed hoods or cowls, floor-length cloaks, and for women, Valkyrie-like suede helmets over a green two-piece. Hargrave felt green to have deep symbolic importance for those who venerated nature; he called it ‘the sharp, brilliant vert of the first thrusting leaf-spears of the vernal equinox’ (Hargrave, n.d.).

As Kibbo Kift began to develop political philosophies, and particularly as they made the economic theories of Major Douglas ever more central, their so-called ‘habit’ became more uniform in appearance, in both senses of the word. By the time the organisation entered its second decade, no closer to achieving its lofty aims and with seriously dwindling numbers in the low hundreds, Hargrave resolved to refocus on economic reform alone. With a dramatic flourish, in 1931 his organisation cast aside camping and craft and became instead a mouthpiece for financial change. This sudden shift caused inevitable rifts among those who were unable to follow their leader’s new

direction. However, Hargrave was keen to reassure those that remained that this was not a U-turn in proceedings, but a natural development that had been planned all along. As such, he regularly revisited the group's philosophy to reframe it to this new end, and carefully retained key elements of continuity from the earlier organisation into its later development. The endurance of the green shirt was central.

A 'New Model Army'

From 1931, Hargrave also created a new streamlined urban identity for his followers [\[Fig.2\]](#). His men were now sharp-shouldered in white buckskin-belted tunics with asymmetrical fastenings, rakish caps, tailored shorts and cable-knit knee socks. The earlier hoods remained, but were now lined with white silk. The outfit was professionally produced rather than hand-cut and glued. Economic reform might not need a uniform, but Hargrave defended its inclusion as an essential part of group technique. He asserted, 'Kinsmen must bear in mind that the public will form its opinion of the efficiency and capabilities of The Kindred from the impression it receives of Kinsmen in habit' ('Kincouncil Decrees and Notices', 1931: 1). For any who saw a core contradiction in the group's origins as anti-war scouts, Hargrave asserted that their military style and comportment was akin to the Royal Army Medical Corps, with whom he had served in the First World War. They must pursue their Social Credit aims with a similar 'unarmed military technique'. As such, they aimed to become 'a New Economic Corps. A military, or soldierlike, formation and method is forced upon us because the British People (whether it knows it or not) is at war. It is an economic war, but war nevertheless' (Hargrave, 1931: 3).

Initially, the 'green habit' demonstrated the group's roots in Kibbo Kift, which had achieved plentiful press attention in Britain, largely due to its striking appearance, and also some success abroad through Hargrave's publications on woodcraft techniques of outdoor living (see, for example, Hargrave 1919). Hoping to transfer these associations to his 'New Model Army', he claimed: 'Before long, whenever the old English hunting green is worn, the public will know that it stands FOR THE

BRITISH PEOPLE AGAINST INTERNATIONAL FINANCE!' ('Welcome to the Green Shirts', 1931: 3). In order to achieve a smooth transition from a camp and campaign group into a full political party, however, several years of compromises and transformations were made.

The first was that the highly stylised outfit of 1931 proved too expensive for most, and Hargrave intended to create a mass movement. Off-the-shelf green shirts replaced the tailored tunic. The hood, shorts and knee socks that had marked a connection to the hiking years were also hard to explain to the new recruits who came to economic reform from different backgrounds. In particular, Hargrave sought allegiance with the League of Unemployed, which included large numbers of jobless men in the north of England and leaders with economic reform sympathies. These men were supplied with free green shirts to wear so they could maintain an organised appearance and show their connection as an associated group with costs covered by Hargrave's advertising director employer, Colin Hurry, a wealthy Social Credit supporter. In time, to boost numbers, these associate members were brought into the fold as part of a wider Social Credit 'movement', and the informal nickname they had acquired of the Green Shirts was adopted as an official addition. By 1933, this title completely replaced the hard-to-understand term Kibbo Kift.

Although the second version of Green Shirt 'kit' [Fig. 3] consisted of a dark Green Shirt ('blouse pattern'), a black leather belt with brass buckle, and a dark green beret (with badge on left), to be worn with 'ordinary gray flannel trousers', this was not essential to begin with: 'The Green Shirt, worn with any kind of trousers, is all that is necessary to make a start' ('Come On, The Green Shirts!' 1933: 3). Through the supply of mass-produced green shirts for followers, Hargrave was able to cheaply build numbers across the country and to multiply the organisation's visual presence. As he asserted, somewhat optimistically, 'There is no doubt that we begin to succeed in giving political significance to the colour known as 'hunting green', or Kin green' ('Welcome to the Green Shirts', 1931: 3). The shade was carefully managed by Hargrave. He emphasised that it was 'a dark 'bottle' green, very like Lincoln green and Kendal green' ('Welcome to the Green Shirts', 1931: 3) and

elsewhere warned against 'sage green, olive green, or any dull green paint of fabric' (Hargrave, 1935: 3). The green must be bright; as Hargrave put it, in typical evangelical tones, 'It is the outward and visible sign of LIFE BREAKING OUT of the Grave of the Living Dead' (Hargrave, November 1935: 3). Drums, flags, banners and printed matter were all produced in striking green, with white and black highlights. Hargrave argued,

If we wish to have an effect upon anyone – educated or uneducated – we must first of all open their mind through one of the five senses. You must know how to play on their emotions, and the best method is to show them things, not ideas.

You must be seen and heard. Every colour has its own emotion – green has a very particular one; it is automatic and an idea is attached to it. It sounds abstract but for the Green Shirt Movement for Social Credit it is very important ('Replacing the Loss of Propaganda Power', 1934: 4).

Because of the centrality of 'soldierly smartness' to the Green Shirts ('Kincouncil Decrees and Notices', 1931: 1), it was inevitable that they would come under the jurisdiction of the Public Order Act, even though they did not align themselves with communism or fascism and proposed an alternative direction. Undoubtedly, the aims of the Green Shirts were political, not least as they made the transition in 1935 from a campaign group to a formal party. In the last month 1936, on the eve of the Act becoming law, Green Shirts campaigned inside and outside the Houses of Parliament, arguing for their orderliness and good reputation, and protesting the 'un-Britishness' of the Bill. Principal among their concerns was how they would convey their message without their display techniques. As always, members were encouraged to obey the law. They were told, through their official gazette, 'We do not want martyrs – yet! Better to have Green Shirts on the streets than in prison' ('The Public Order Act, 1936', 1936: 3). But a core consideration was 'What are we to do to compensate for the loss sustained under the Act?' (Tacey, 1937: 2) In many ways, for Green Shirts, their medium was their message. Without it, they were economic theory alone.

After the Act was passed, Charles Tacey, the Green Shirts' Director of Propaganda reflected, 'We used the uniform as a 'magnet' to draw the eyes of the public. We are now deprived of utilising this method of attraction and so must develop others to replace it. While the uniform could be displayed publicly every Green Shirt in uniform was a living advertisement for Social Credit. Heads were turned and interest quickened whenever a "shock trooper" walked down a street' (Tacey, 1937: 2). Drums, flags and banners were not outlawed by the Act, and the Green Shirts adopted a similar strategy to Blackshirts in their adoption of ordinary coloured shirts and ties, and the continued use of badges, street meetings and parades. As with the Blackshirts, however, they were also charged with breaches of the Act, and – as will be discussed below - green-clad members came twice before court.

'There are shirts and shirts'

The first charge was at Camberwell in London in April 1937. A civilian lodged the initial complaint to the police, noting that a speaker at a Social Credit Party rally wore a green shirt, with a green collar and tie, which featured 'small interwoven inscriptions of the Movement' (the double K). He also wore grey flannel trousers and a dark belt. In court, the magistrate was shown the shirt-and-tie ensemble worn on the day of arrest alongside the former uniform of the organisation before the ban. As the case for the defence summarised, 'There are shirts and shirts!' He noted that 'the recognised uniform of the Party, with its pleated pockets and silver buttons and all the rest of it [...] is what you might call a blouse-shirt.' By this, he signalled the stylised nature of the garment and its separation from every day wear: 'It is not the sort of shirt that any of us would wear unless we were connected with some peculiar body who wore such things.' He concluded, 'it is impossible to say a man wearing a green shirt is wearing uniform' ('Camberwell, April 1937'). The case was dismissed.

In a second incident in Luton in April 1936, permission had been granted for the Social Credit Party to hold an outdoor meeting. Two group members were accused of wearing party emblems, and the prosecution reminded them that it was not necessary to be wearing a full uniform to fall

under the Act's reach. On the day, 34 men and women had assembled with drums, flags, buttonhole badges, arm badges and ties. They had set up a rostrum with flags and paraded. Torches were lit, songs sung, speeches were made. Mid-way through the meeting a police officer suggested that the speaker was in uniform, and three Green Shirt men - Ward, Taylor and Hawthorn - were arrested and charged. In court it was noted that 'Ward was dressed in a green jersey, green shirt, green tie, fawn raincoat of military pattern and an armband with the reversed K and the ordinary K sign. Taylor was wearing an ordinary suit, green tie, green armband with the double K and a badge with a similar sign in the lapel of his jacket.' With recourse to the dictionary definition of uniform, the defence put an argument that what his clients were wearing was neither distinctive nor uniform (one wore a 'sweater' and one an everyday shirt). One of the accused said the shirt was a sports shirt purchased some time before for a sea-trip. He claimed to merely like the colour: 'My room at home is decorated in green' ('R. v. Taylor, Hawthorn, Ward', 1937). The magistrate again dismissed the case.

Press reports afterwards showed some disappointment with the ready acquiescence of the accused in Public Order Act trials. As journalist D. B. Wyndham Lewis reflected, on the Green Shirts, 'They didn't put up a very impressive show in court. They seemed to us a shade too anxious to explain away their greenery.' He argued that Green Shirts 'surely ought to show the same grim fire-eyed defiance when up before the beak for wearing Social Credit colours as they did when they marched recently to Trafalgar Square to demonstrate sympathy for the Spanish Reds?' In both cases, he lamented a 'notable absence of devilry when up against the authorities. It doesn't ring true after the manifestoes' (Wyndham Lewis, 1937: 545). It is true that there was a discrepancy between the tenor of the claims on the printed page and Green Shirt behaviour in court. In the pages of his magazine, Hargrave proclaimed that his group were practicing 'guerrilla' tactics in a 'Holy War' against corporate finance (Hargrave, 1937: 2). Following the uniform ban, however, the eschatological fervour of the group was undoubtedly dampened. In a last hurrah that showed Hargrave's ad-man's innovation, a May Day Demonstration in 1938 saw: 'a contingent marched in formation carrying their green shirts on poles.' The accompanying posters declared: 'Shirt or No Shirt

– Social Credit is Coming!’ As Hargrave gloated, ‘the “banned” uniform went on parade, and the authorities dare not make such fools of themselves as to arrest a contingent of shirts with no men in them! There’s going to be more of this’ (Hargrave, 1938: 3).

There was, however, to be little more. A series of blows to the Green Shirt cause, including a break with Major Douglas over his anti-Semitism, an unsuccessful attempt by Hargrave to apply Social Credit to a province in Canada, and the coming war meant that the fervour of the Green Shirts-without-Shirts dwindled during the conflict. The group was of insufficient numbers and popularity to have much impact when briefly revived after, and in 1951 it closed entirely. The banning of political uniforms had destabilised the popularity of the British Union of Fascists, but it incidentally played a role in demolishing the Social Credit Party. Hard-line Social Credit loyalists looked back in later years with a revisionist view that made the Act all about them. As one former member put it in 1979, it was ‘a measure ostensibly aimed at the Fascist Blackshirts, but which also conveniently (for the authorities) struck at the Social Credit Party, increasingly seen by the Money Power as the real danger for their established order’ (Elwell-Sutton, 1979: 5). Imagined power and imagined threats were embodied in a battle over a uniform that could not even be defined.

Children in costume

Home Office files contain extensive correspondence with and about another green-shirted organisation that had rather different experiences at the hands of the authorities. In February 1937, the leader of the children’s organisation, Woodcraft Folk, sought advice about whether members in organisational clothing would be at risk from the Public Order Act (‘Woodcraft Folk International Camp at Brighton’, 1937). Specifically, their enquiry related to their planned international summer camp, to be held over three weeks on the south coast of England. The Home Office was torn: was this a political organisation, and was it uniformed? Woodcraft Folk described their aims as educational, and specifically referred to their dress as ‘costume’ (Pollen, 2016). The organisation had been formed in 1925 as a direct splinter group of Kibbo Kift, following a 1924 dispute about

ideological approach and organisational method. Its green outfit, based around rustic hand-crafted fringed jerkins and shorts, rucksacks and decorated leather belts, shared much with the early attire of Kibbo Kift, but its status in relation to the jurisdiction of the Public Order Act was less clear cut. In the Home Office's initial estimation, Woodcraft Folk were 'a socialist counterpart of the Scouts movement whose avowed objects include active opposition to War and to Fascism' but they were aware that there was some absurdity of applying the Act to clothes worn by children under fifteen, 'unless', they hesitated, '*there is a very strong and clear political element*' ('Woodcraft Folk International Camp at Brighton', 1937; italics in original). What would constitute 'strong and clear'? Special Branch had followed Woodcraft Folk since at least the early 1930s; their report to the Home Office and found little political activity beyond a general alliance with progressives and pacifists.

The event organiser, Henry Fair, informed the Home Office that up to 2000 international children would also be attending in their various organisational uniforms, including the blue shirts and red neckerchiefs of the European Red Falcons, who were directly aligned to Socialist Education International. Home Office staff asked among themselves: should permission be granted, and on what basis? There was some reluctance. The application seemed innocuous, but the possible repercussion of any precedent was cause for concern: 'how can we deal with an application for uniform in camp by the Young Communist League, the Young Fascisti, or the Young Pioneers?' ('Woodcraft Folk International Camp at Brighton', 1937) Woodcraft Folk's socialist interests meant that could not be simply described as non-political, like Boy Scouts, who were exempt from the Act. The final compromise was to not 'upset the plans for a children's camp, by insisting that they must not wear their green jerkins and shorts.' Permission was granted 'on the condition that no person wearing the uniform shall attend any meeting of a political nature, or take part in a procession in the nature of a political demonstration' ('Woodcraft Folk International Camp at Brighton', 1937).

Political jerkins

In August, however, with camp proceedings well underway, *Daily Telegraph* and *News Chronicle* carried reports emphasising the political nature of the event ('Red Flag', 1937; 'Youth's Challenge to Fascism', 1937). Children were claimed to be flying the red flag, making clenched fist salutes and singing the *Internationale*. A new file was opened. Had the Act been breached? The Home Office noted, 'There can be no doubt now that the people at this camp are members of political organisations' ('Woodcraft Folk International Camp at Rottingdean', 1937). The fascists also went down to investigate. In an inflammatory report in their news sheet, *Action*, entitled 'Home and Foreign Reds in Public Order Act Evasion. Will the Government Act?' A. K. Chesterton complained:

while patriotic Britons are forbidden to wear the uniform of their political creed, and immediately command the attention of the police should they appear even in an undress black shirt, hordes of Reds and Pinks from all over Europe are at this moment assembled upon the Downs at Overdene [sic] Camp, near Brighton, wearing two distinct uniforms and giving the Communist salute.

He fantasised:

Suppose we had invited a German S.A. man, with a sprinkling of Hitler Jugend and Italian Ballila, to our encampment at Selsey; suppose we had then labelled it a 'children's camp'; suppose we had ourselves dressed in green or blue or any other colour of shirt or jerkin; suppose we had marched through Chichester thus attired, giving the Fascist salute – how long would we have found ourselves out of jail? Twenty-four hours at the most. Yet Jews, aliens and Reds are allowed to do all these things with impunity (Chesterton, 1937: 11).

The Chief Commissioner of Police was more measured in his appraisal. He noted in internal correspondence that there was 'left wing sympathy' in the camp, and that red flags flew, but they did so alongside the multi-coloured flags of the cooperative movement. No political speeches were made, and the only complaints were about the volume of the loudspeakers, not the content of the

announcement. A band played on the Level (a public park in the town) but no political speeches were made; the inoffensive uniform of the band was 'white cricket shirts, short blue trousers and blue blazers' ('Woodcraft Folk International Camp at Rottingdean', 1937). Despite the organisation's conformity to police requirements, the apolitical status of the camp was nevertheless on shaky ground, from both right and left perspectives. The *Daily Worker*, for example, claimed it as 'a splendid training ground for future fighters for a Socialist Europe' ('Well Done Woodcraft', 1937).

In the end, no prosecution was made, but Woodcraft Folk took the threat to their legal status seriously, choosing to keep their 'costume' as an important part of their collective identity but progressively emphasising their educational purposes over political aims (Davis, 2000). They could not have both. These priorities endure, although for different reasons. With around 15,000 current members, Woodcraft Folk's non-party political interests are a core component of its charitable status (Woodcraft Folk, 2011). While the organisation still takes part in anti-war parades and other pacifist protests, it advises its members never to appear in Woodcraft Folk attire at political demonstrations. When protest becomes politics with a capital P, the organisation's status is put at risk. Woodcraft Folk was undoubtedly founded on socialist sympathies, but these have become increasingly diffuse and are no longer party political. Curiously, despite the fact that most members now opt not to wear a green shirt, or even a casual T-shirt with the organisation's logo, in recent times, 'costume' has been redesignated in order for the organisation to be eligible for support through government funding schemes. Woodcraft Folk is now recognised as a 'uniformed youth group' alongside Police Cadets, the Boy's Brigade and the Scout Association, organisations to which they were once ideologically opposed (Woodcraft Folk, 2015). Both political status and the definition of uniform are evidently mutable, dependent on circumstances, and remain in the eye of the beholder.

The fabric of intimidation

The mixed fates of green shirted organisations under the Public Order Act reveal the mobility and flexibility of both terms in the loaded phrase ‘political uniform’. Clothing has a complex terminology, and words such as kit, costume and habit have their own distinctive meanings that are not simply synonymous. When is a shirt a blouse, a sweater or a jerkin? It was on these points of detail that fortunes rested in 1937. Uniforms are perhaps the most coded of all clothes, freighted with declamatory signification. They perform allegiance, belief and identity, yet they are also, as Jennifer Craik puts it, ‘ambiguous masks’ (2005: 6).

When do fabric and buttons become political? As the above examples have shown, uniformed political identity can be performed, subverted or denied according to slight variations in cut, colour and cloth. Clothes can suggest multiple meanings to different viewers in the same instant, while identical garments can mean entirely different things in altered circumstances. In some cases these differences were enough to carry prison sentences, and yet the object at the very centre of the legislation repeatedly slipped out of view. The power of uniform is such that it can simultaneously be the subject of legal protection and prosecution. A set of garments associated with orderliness and discipline sits at the very centre of concerns about public disorder; these multiple contradictions demonstrate political uniform’s complexity and, ironically, its lack of uniformity.

The Public Order Act of 1936 was controversial at the time of its devising and was riddled with contradictions in its implementation. The opening clause is less than 25 words long, but it required three hours of parliamentary discussion, and was only approved after 86 amendments (‘Party Uniforms’, 1936: 8). More than eighty years on, it retains its force. Recent prosecutions under the Act have taken place against Britain First, a far-right group that describes itself as a ‘patriotic political party’ (Britain First, 2018). On the most recent occasion, in 2016, members processed through Luton town centre on a so-called ‘Christian Patrol’. Their leader Paul Golding carried a large cross, and handed out inflammatory anti-Islam literature. Dressed in green zip-up fleece jackets and beanie hats, each emblazoned with Britain First insignia of crown, Union Jack and a golden lion, the

massed bodies were undoubtedly uniform in appearance and political in purpose. Despite fleeces being most commonly associated with casual outdoor wear and middle-aged comfort, the prosecution described them as 'intimidating'. Golding pleaded guilty to the charges and received a substantial fine (Mortimer, 2016). Eighty years on, a law originally designed to curb the uniformed violence of the British Union of Fascists continues to be utilised. That Britain First wear green instead of black, and fleece instead of formal wear is of no consequence. What indicates comfort in one context can signal conflict in another. The flexibility of the Act acknowledges that political uniform continues to take multiple shapes and forms.

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