

## **Summary**

### **Racism and Extremism Monitor: The Lonsdale problem**

**Edited by Jaap van Donselaar**

Almost ten years ago, the research project *Monitoring racism and the extreme right* was launched. The first report was published in 1997, and since then six general, broad reports have appeared. A series of special articles have also been issued: smaller research reports dealing with specific subjects. *The Lonsdale problem* is the fourth in this series and is also the first to appear under the general project's new name: *Monitoring racism and extremism*. The problem of public expressions of racism and extremism among young people during the year 2004, and especially after the murder of Theo van Gogh on 2 November 2004, has mushroomed. In the first months of 2005, hardly a day went by that the so-called 'Lonsdale youth' did not find themselves the subject of publicity. This term refers to extreme right-wing or racist 'gabbers'. 'Gabber' refers to a lifestyle that is extremely popular among young people in the Netherlands and centres around hardcore techno music. A substantial number of gabbers have xenophobic, racist or extreme-right ideas.

Lonsdale is a British brand of clothing that is popular among all gabbers, including those with an extreme right-wing, racist orientation. And extreme right-wing, racist gabbers have evidently become such a decisive factor in the creation of the image that a reversal has taken place: 'Lonsdale youth' does not refer so much to young people who wear Lonsdale clothing as to the extreme right-wing, racist young people among them.

The aim of this study is to acquire more insight into:

- three different approaches to the problem of extreme right-wing gabbers and incidents with which they are associated
- the nature, proliferation and size of the radical right-wing gabber groups and the violent and non-violent incidents

Extreme right-wing gabbers are an aspect of the Lonsdale problem. Another aspect concerns reactions to these gabbers and to the incidents with which they are connected or associated. The researched response includes:

- news media
- police
- the law courts and the judiciary
- the General Intelligence and Security Service (in Dutch: Algemene Inlichtingen- en Veiligheidsdienst, AIVD)
- public administration and politics
- schools

- youth work sector
- anti-racism activities
- extreme right-wing organisations
- groups of young ethnic minorities
- the hard-core techno scene
- the Lonsdale company

Concerning the forms of response that focus on solving problems, we have also taken a look at a few examples of a specific form of de-radicalisation that has been adopted in other countries: the ‘exit’ strategies in Norway, Sweden and Germany.

### **1. Three approaches**

As far as the nature and background of the problem are concerned, we have focussed on (a) questions concerning the racist, extreme right-wing and even neo-Nazi content of extreme right-wing gabbers and the incidents with which these gabbers are associated; (b) the question to what extent the Lonsdale problem can be regarded as an aspect of youth culture and (c) the question concerning the connection with forms of juvenile delinquency. One general finding that touches on all three questions, and that in and of itself is neither new nor surprising, is that there is a great variety in both the groups and the incidents. Each group is different. The racist content of the groups can vary enormously, from high to low. These differences can be observed between groups, but there can also be a great many differences within a particular group. The same applies, all things considered, to groups with an extreme right-wing orientation. Here, too, considerable gradations can be observed. Determining the ideological content (racist, extreme right-wing) of groups and group members also depends on the definition being used and especially whether the definition is broad or narrow. In the judging of incidents, several different assessments and evaluations (definitions of the situation) play a role apart from the variation in the level of seriousness. An attack on Muslim property can have a racist impact because the incident is understood as such by the victims, but that does not necessarily mean that the perpetrators had pronounced and well-considered racist motives. Their motives may also have been less pronounced and less considered. Whether there is evidence of racism or not is generally not an easy question to answer, in our opinion. Such an assessment depends on the breadth or narrowness of the chosen definition on the one hand and the context of the incident in question, as well as any other specific factors, on the other. The same is true for two other categories of incidents that often occur in conjunction with the Lonsdale problem: assault and confrontation. In many of these incidents, the ideological motives probably do not run any deeper than powerful beliefs about ‘us’ and ‘them’, but we know of numerous examples in which racist views do play a role.

The Lonsdale problem is often connected with the youth culture. On the one hand this is certainly justified: the young people in question share musical

tastes, parties, style and choice of clothing. Many representatives of youth cultures identify themselves as groups that are reacting against older generations, especially that of their parents. Among radical right-wing gabbers this is true to a certain extent, but among others the identifying factors are political and social ideas. It is not unusual for them to share a xenophobic, racist orientation with their parents. When it comes to such orientations, the term 'counter-culture' is more apt than 'youth culture'. The sympathy of parents for the radical right-wing ideas of their children is not unconditional and seems to end whenever there is talk of an open neo-Nazi orientation. Contacts with police and the courts also seem to form a turning point for parents.

As far as we can tell, there is a substantial overlap between the problem of radical right-wing gabbers with that of ordinary criminals. This has to do with the drugs, violence and juvenile delinquency that are connected with gang-like behaviour. Although it would be going too far to say that drug use is a positive norm among all gabbers, it is quite a widespread practice. The more extreme right-wing gabbers become politicised and are taken into organised, extreme right-wing groups, the more the norm changes: there is a powerful rejection of drug use. Whether this also leads to corresponding practical changes in behaviour is difficult to say. As we said before: not all groups are the same. The same can also be said of the extent to which the various groups can be connected with juvenile delinquency or anti-social behaviour.

## **2. Nature, proliferation and size**

What can be reported about the nature, proliferation and size of radical right-wing gabber groups, and of the violent and non-violent incidents associated with them? We have tried to take inventories of the numbers of groups and incidents for the years 2002, 2003, 2004 and part of 2005 (the data were collected up to 1 August 2005).

We counted a total of 125 gabber groups who had a radical right-wing orientation or have been connected with incidents. These groups were different in size; roughly speaking they ran from about five to about fifty persons. For the researched period, 2002-2005, we therefore calculate 600 to 6,000 persons. In addition to the size, spatial proliferation and concentration also differ. It is often said that the Lonsdale problem is a rural phenomenon. That's only partly true. While the Lonsdale problem seems to occur predominantly in rural areas, it can also be found in large cities. The question concerning the social spread of constellations of racist and extreme right-wing groups and acts of violence is frequently asked, here and in other countries. Although many explanations have been put forward for certain patterns of social proliferation, no conclusive explanation is in sight. Incidents in which gabbers are involved can be of a racist or a radical right-wing nature, but they can also be ordinary incidents that have no connection with racism or radical right-wing sympathies (such as drugs criminality, noise pollution, vandalism). These incidents are not included in

our statistics. When counting incidents we have focussed exclusively on the incidents with a racist or extreme right-wing basis.

In the inventory of incidents in which gabbers are involved, a distinction is made between non-violent and violent incidents. The non-violent incidents include racist graffiti, folder campaigns, demonstrations, insults and breach of the peace. In counting the violent incidents we adhered to the standard division from our monitoring project: targeted graffiti, threats, bomb scares, confrontations, vandalism, arson, assault, bombings, manslaughter and murder. Incidentally, we did not come across any examples of the last two in relation to the Lonsdale problem. A total of 206 incidents with extreme right-wing gabbers were surveyed during the researched period: 63 non-violent and 143 violent.

Judging from our inventory, the general impression that the problem with radical right-wing gabbers manifested itself mainly during the course of 2004 was confirmed. Another impression that was confirmed is that most of the incidents were confrontations and assaults. In confrontations, the border between being a perpetrator and being a victim is often unclear. The initiative may come from the side of the gabbers, but it may also come from the side of the ethnic minorities. In many cases there seem to have been a series of incidents, actions that provoke reactions, or long, built-up tensions. In general, much more is known about the part that gabbers play in confrontations than about the part that ethnic minority young people play, while the part played by the latter may be just as important. As far as this is concerned, the name 'Lonsdale problem' is one-sided and misleading. Our findings confirm the general impression that the problem with radical right-wing gabbers was manifested mainly during the course of 2004. There was an increase in the number of racist incidents in which gabbers were involved, mainly after the murder of Theo van Gogh. The portion of gabbers in the series of violent incidents after the murder seemed larger than it actually was, judging from all the media attention. In the course of 2005 we saw the number of violent incidents by gabbers drop slightly, while the media attention by mid-2005 was practically nil. The connection between media attention and the number of actual incidents is therefore not strong. As noted earlier in this research report, little absolute value should be attached to the figures as we present them. Diffuse, informal groups that come and go are simply difficult to count, and statistics for groups and incidents can create a distorted picture due to the problem of underreporting. In reality the situation is probably worse than our figures suggest.

### **3. Patterns of reaction**

It is striking to note how the attention paid to the Lonsdale problem by the news media developed from sporadic, local interest to substantial, massive attention, including from the national press, by the end of 2004 and the beginning of 2005. Although the problem did not diminish in significance during the course of 2005, the media attention subsided considerably. It also seems, partly as a result of large-scale media attention in the course of 2004

and the beginning of 2005, that gabbers in general as well as gabbers in Lonsdale clothing had acquired a negative stigma. Finally, it should be noted that under the influence of the extensive media coverage attention being paid to the problem of radical right-wing gabbers has sharply increased. It is also likely that because of the stimulation resulting from all the media attention, the problem has been placed high on the political agenda.

In the response of the police we see how creating a good information system and acting proactively are as important as the work of investigating concrete criminal offences and maintaining law and order. A striking feature of the police response in the various regions has to do with the differences in the way the problem is being recognised (or not recognised at all) and the variety of levels of assessment. Here a role is played by questions such as: is this mainly a problem of racism, racist youth gangs, juvenile delinquency or troublesome adolescents? In line with this, ideas are being exchanged about the priority that should be given to the problem.

As far as the role of the courts and the legal system are concerned, two things stand out. First is the passivity in combating the posting of material on the internet that is punishable by law, even though this very medium is an important element of the Lonsdale problem. Another striking finding is that the punishments being imposed by the courts for the same offences seem to vary considerably. Further investigation should reveal what the reasons are for this discrepancy.

Processes of radicalisation have attracted the attention of the AIVD (the General Intelligence and Security Service), and this service was one of the first to issue a research report on radical right-wing gabbers. In this memo there is a strong tendency to relativise the racist and radical right-wing content of the problem by means of restrictive definitions. On the other hand, the memo warns of the harmful influence of radical right-wing groups on interethnic relations. The AIVD also made note of the limited success of extreme right-wing organisations in their attempts to recruit adherents among gabbers.

The variety of reactions from the public administration and (municipal) politicians is similar to the differences that can be observed among the police. There are differences in recognising the problem (or not recognising it at all), in the assessments of the nature of the problem and in the way the problem should be prioritised. In practice this has led to a broad scale of reactions and definitions of the situation.

The reactions in the youth work sector and in schools are rather similar because the main issue is maintaining law and order and determining what can and cannot be tolerated. One difference is that many schools are understandably afraid of acquiring a bad reputation, which can be damaging to the school. As a rule schools are very reluctant to make problems public, and the Lonsdale problem would be no exception. This may be a reason why so few incidents are known. Indeed, it is unlikely that there really are so few

incidents occurring at schools. Further investigation should reveal to what extent our suspicions are correct.

One initiative in the anti-racism sector that is important in principle is the establishment of an intervention team by Forum (Institute for Multicultural Development). This team can advise a town or city in dealing with inter-ethnic tension. Because this initiative is so recent there is still little that can be said at the moment about the results.

Extreme right-wing organisations (including political parties) have reacted to extreme right-wing gabbers in a variety of ways. On the one hand extreme right-wing gabbers are attractive as potential adherents, but on the other hand they may be problematic as 'loose cannons' or because of their drug use. A number of organisations have actually tried to recruit radical right-wing gabbers. They have met with occasional success, but we know from experience that it is doubtful whether these organisations will be able to hold onto the gabbers for the long term. Until now the attempts at recruitment have not resulted in substantial growth for extreme right-wing organisations.

Reactions to extreme right-wing gabbers have increasingly come from their most obvious opponents: young people from ethnic minority groups. As far as we can tell, the nature of these reactions is not comparable in terms of seriousness with those carried out by extreme right-wing gabbers, but they are clearly visible. It has also been noted that there is often less information available about the participation of ethnic minority young people in inter-ethnic tension than about the role of native Dutch young people. We recommend that specific research be conducted on the inter-ethnic tension between young people as well as the way the two groups influence each other in the radicalisation process.

Attempts at damage control are also being made within the hard-core scene by applying stricter rules and other measures. Unfortunately, no systematic information is available on 'what works and what doesn't'.

If there is one party that has suffered significantly from the negative image of extreme right-wing gabbers it is the company that puts the Lonsdale brand of clothing on the Dutch market. Whether the company will be able to withstand the tough, negative stigma remains to be seen.

These are the reaction patterns so far. In regard to the forms of response that are aimed at solving the problem, we have taken a look at experiences outside the country that deal with a specific form of de-radicalisation: the 'exit' strategies in Norway, Sweden and Germany. In these countries, problems with extreme right-wing young people have existed for a longer period of time and attempts at promoting and supervising de-radicalisation have been going on for a number of years. However, although certain lessons can be learned from these experiences, we should be cautious about indiscriminately applying foreign experiences to the Dutch situation. In Germany, for example, most of the forms of response address a problem that

is more widespread and serious than anything we have confronted in the Netherlands so far. In the Scandinavian countries the first exit activities were based on initiatives taken by the parents of extreme right-wing young people, while the parents of such young people in the Netherlands have remained out of the picture for the most part. We also do not have interesting former right-wing extremists such as Ingo Hasselbach in Germany. But taking into account the differences between the various countries, which are sometimes considerable, there are lessons to be learned. Now that there are substantial numbers of radical right-wing young people in the Netherlands, the question of the extent to which exit initiatives are justified here is certainly deserving of our attention. A few of the goals of exit projects, such as the improvement of knowledge, the promotion of expertise among professionals and the exchange of information almost seem to have been devised for the present situation in the Netherlands.

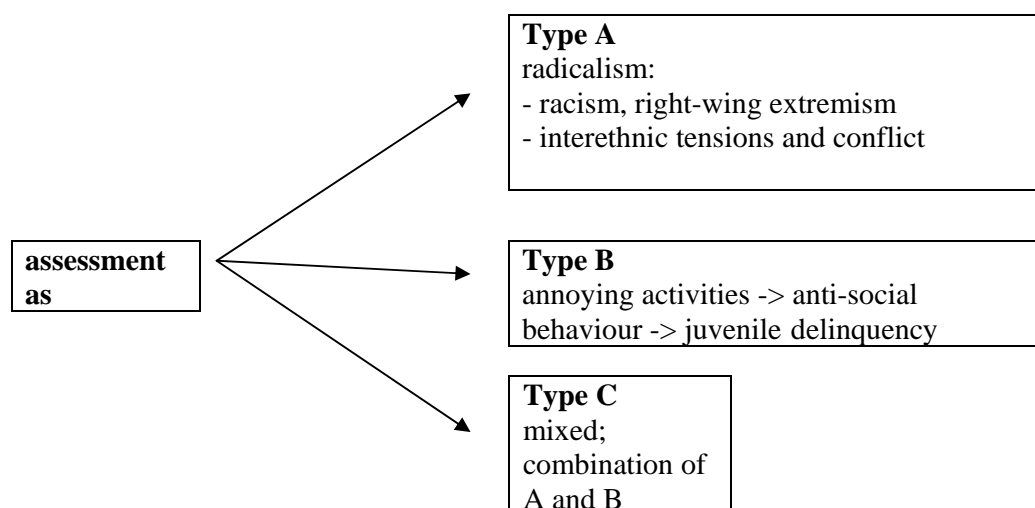
#### **4. A closer look at patterns of response**

The Lonsdale problem is very broad: there are a wide range of manifestations with many different assessments of those manifestations and different meanings attached to them. These variations are reflected in the patterns of response. Even in the responses that are aimed at solving the problem we see a great diversity of assessments and evaluations – in short, a whole range of definitions of the situation.

Our study makes use of the *Thomas theorem*, the core of which is formed by definitions of the situation. A definition of the situation is not so much concerned about whether a particular idea is true, but whether that idea is *regarded* as true, because people are much more likely to allow themselves to be led by the latter when they act than by the former. The original Thomas theorem focuses on the difference between objective truth and subjective assessment. According to additions to the theory later added by others, it may also focus on the difference between various subjective assessments, or various definitions of the situation. In the absence of systematic information concerning the numerous aspects of the Lonsdale problem, and due to the fact that there may be differences of opinion when definitions are formulated, the discrepancies between objective truths and subjective assessments are not easy to uncover. It may be possible to answer a number of questions objectively, although in the case of some questions that seem simple enough – such as the size of a certain group of extreme right-wing young people in location X – it still isn't easy. For instance, assessing the extent to which neo-Nazism is a factor as opposed to conventional gang-like behaviour is even more difficult. In the various forms of response that are aimed at solving the problem, the second theory can be observed in full: the appearance of different definitions of the situation.

In figure 1 a few central definitions of the situation are shown as they actually occur. The assessments are condensed into three ideal types.

**Figure 1: 'The Lonsdale problem': assessing the type of problem**

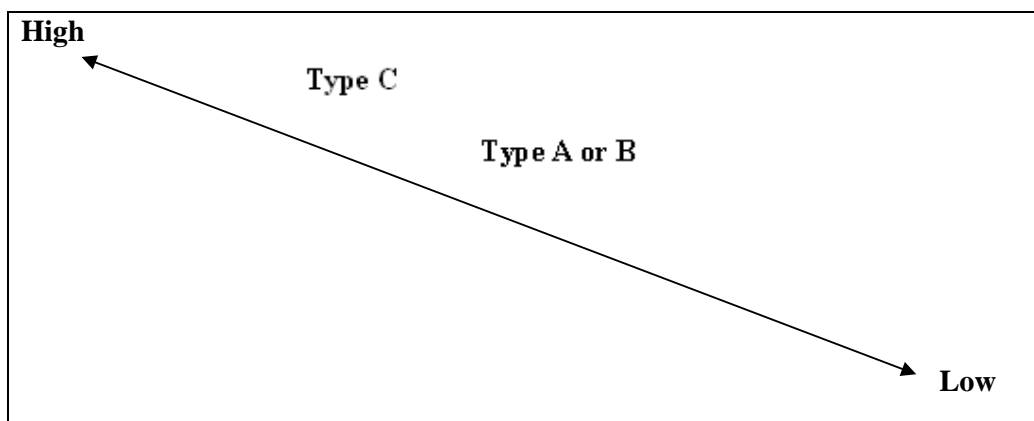


- Type A: assessing the problem as a problem of radicalism. We might go on to think of a problem of racist, extreme right-wing or even neo-Nazi ideology, or of the source of interethnic tension. The latter can occur without a high level of extremist ideology.
- Type B: assessing the problem as mainly a more general case of problematic young people's behaviour. The problem can be presented on a sliding scale: annoying activities, anti-social behaviour, juvenile delinquency.
- Type C: this type of assessment is a combination of the previous two types: a perception of the problem in which a certain measure of racist, extreme right-wing elements play a role as well as elements of problematic young people's behaviour.

Another series of definitions of the situation have to do with the priority given to the solution of the problem. The various substantive assessments of the problem in question – shown by type A, B or C – can result in differences in prioritisation, as shown in figure 2. In approaching a problem that is seen as type A, B or C, a wide range of priorities can be set. They are placed high or low or somewhere in between. The rendering of the positions of the various types in the figure is necessarily more static than in social reality.



**Figure 2: 'The Lonsdale problem': prioritising the type of problem**



We assume the possibility of a connection between the categorisation of the problem as type A, B or C and the prioritisation. But other factors play a role as well, such as media attention. As a rule, a great deal of publicity results in a higher priority. We also have the impression that if the problem is seen as type C, a very high priority will generally be attached to it. The factor 'violence', for example, is not always given a high value in prioritisation. Sometimes the Nazi salute or a swastika has more influence than a violent act. The present broad variety of definitions of the situation results in diverse reactions. Certainly this scale can stem from different assessments of the seriousness of the problem in one location or another. We have found that in many cases problems with radical right-wing gabbers have been classified or prioritised in a way that does not do sufficient justice to the actual situation. We have come across under-prioritisation as well as over-prioritisation. In such a situation, much could be gained from an exchange of information and the promotion of expertise. The gathering of knowledge is primarily a question of setting aside enough time and involving a sufficient number of people, but it is also a question of learning from other regions that are struggling with comparable problems. An important gap in this area is the internet. Like most of their generation, gabbers spend a great deal of time on the internet. They live a portion of their social lives on the internet and extract from it their social and political ideas. At the same time, it appears that governments do not make sufficient use of this medium to build up expertise.

Consequently, a great deal of information about ideas, trends, developments and activities remains invisible. In addition, racist lapses on the internet go unnoticed and unpunished. Since 1999, internet racism has led to about ten criminal convictions. Other methods for curbing right-wing radicalism and racism on the internet – via technical means or forms of digital patrolling – have not yet taken root. The implicit message – that racism and discrimination, like the inciting of violence and threats from the extreme right, are tolerated on the internet – has had alarming consequences. In addition to gathering knowledge, sharing and assessing it is also of essential importance. When we look at various problem situations with gabber groups and ethnic minorities, the most effective approach is that in

which the various parties involved (governments, police, the courts, schools and youth workers) communicate with each other, exchange assessments and coordinate their efforts in taking action.

In recent months, a large number of initiatives have been taken to combat radicalisation in many localities. In these initiatives, the possible radicalisation of Muslim young people has understandably been given a great deal of attention. Much vocal attention has also been given to other processes of radicalisation, including right-wing radicalism.

In the practical task of converting these words into policy, however, such knowledge has contracted into a policy that to a large extent is directed towards Islamistic radicalism. The fact is that much can be learned from both situations about combating radicalisation and about de-radicalisation, and connections have frequently been observed between the radicalisation of right-wing gabbers and the radicalisation of Muslim young people.