



Brixton and After

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Community politics in mainland Britain does not usually encompass violence on the streets. Where political violence has occurred — between Left and Right, pickets and police — it has been located at points of political protest (National Front meetings in Red Lion Square, Lewisham, Southall) or industrial protest (Grunwicks, 1972 building workers strike).

For the community to protest in a violent way is extremely unusual. But in just one year there have been two incidents of violent community protest in mainland Britain.¹ In the St Paul's area of Bristol in April 1980 and in Brixton, South London in April 1981, sections of the community attacked police, burned shops and looted. Petrol bombs and looting are in themselves new features in British political life, but the impact of these events lies not just in these new forms of protest. These events are of significance because they focussed on young black Britons living in decaying inner city areas. These multiracial inner cities have been particularly affected by economic and political neglect in the postwar period. That the communities in such areas have taken to the streets in violent protest marks a new stage in the development of reaction to racism and inner city decay as well as to methods of policing.

St Paul's and Brixton

The centres of the revolts in St Paul's and the Railton Road area of Brixton are where police confrontation with the black community is at its sharpest. A constant and massive police presence — with the pretext of combating the drug dealing, illegal drinking and gaming which do occur in these areas — has developed into a pattern of intense harassment of young black people. As a result there is a state of continuous tension between police and the black youth who gather on the streets and in the cafes. Hence the designation of 'front line' for Railton Road in Brixton.

In April 1980 50 police burst into the Black and White Cafe in St Paul's to raid it for illegal drinking and drug possession. In April 1981, at the end of the week-long Operation Swamp, where police activity in Brixton had been at an even higher profile than usual,² police in

Railton Road took a stabbed black youth into the back of a police van for 'questioning'.

In both incidents black bystanders and residents were outraged at these police actions; outrage which spilled over into attacks on police and property, looting from shops, and in the case of Brixton, the use of petrol bombs (not particularly sophisticated weapons to construct at short notice, despite police claims that these were evidence of a planned attack engineered by outside agitators).

In both cases it was the police and *not* the white population who were a target for attack. In both cases too, damage to property and looting was not completely random, but to some extent selective, aimed at symbols of racism and white power: the shops that don't employ blacks; the pubs that refuse to serve blacks. In both cases too, once the black youth had started the physical fightback against the police, then local white people joined in the attack and the looting.

The significant difference in these two events, however, was the police reaction. At St Paul's, the police withdrew from the area for four hours — a tactic criticised by the law and order lobby, but which in fact enabled a cooling-down period.

Brixton was a very different story. Here the police have been subject to much community scrutiny, but have tended to entrench rather than modify their position as a result. In addition the revolt happened at the end of a week's special exercise, when the police were especially geared up for confrontation. The initial incident happened on a Friday night. On the Saturday, police presence in the area was even greater and a tense atmosphere prevailed throughout the day until a second incident (police arrest of a black man outside a minicab office in the heart of the area) provoked a further 'flashpoint'. Instead of seeking to calm down the atmosphere, police action intensified it. Even more police were sent on to the streets, many with riot shields; the tube station was closed, buses halted and the whole area sealed off, preventing pedestrians and motorists getting into or through the area; the Special Patrol Group raided a local estate and told residents to keep indoors. During this weekend of intense police activity there were also times of apparent breakdown of the internal command structure of the police. Young and inexperienced constables were left to cope with burning riot shields and crowd attack without senior officers present for guidance or discipline. The massive police presence continued for the next few days, with coachloads of police parked in side streets, helicopter and video surveillance, public transport not resumed for 24 hours and (even six weeks later) a permanent police guard on Brixton police station.

And, two weeks after these events in Brixton, similar clashes between police and black youth took place in North and East London.

BACKGROUND

The black community

Blacks in Britain are no longer 'immigrants'. Young blacks in areas such as St Paul's and Brixton were born here. This fact alone establishes enormous differences between the black population of Britain 20 years ago and the black community today.³ West Indians were encouraged to migrate to Britain in the 50s for specific economic reasons; to staff the expanding service sector and the new welfare state which a relatively fully employed native workforce could not undertake. And they settled, almost by chance, within certain inner-city areas.

The East Indian community, which came later, and for political as well as economic reasons, is more diverse than that of West Indian origin, although this community too has its children born in Britain. All blacks in Britain have a shared experience of racism, but the recent events have involved those of West Indian origin, and it is this section of the black community under consideration here.

The young black Britons of West Indian origin differ from their parents both in economic role and political consciousness. The combination of economic recession and racism means an effective denial of the economic role 'enjoyed' by their parents in the past. This denial is reinforced by black youth's rejection of the low paid menial jobs accepted by their parents. This rejection is just one aspect of a growing black consciousness; whilst the first wave of West Indian immigrants were optimistic about their future in British society, their British-born children are cynical about theirs.

This growth of black consciousness has also happened in a period during which racism has become legitimated. This process has taken place not just in the enactment of racist laws and the establishment of racist practices both by the repressive and welfare sides of the state. Racism has also been allowed to flourish through the non-enactment of tough anti-racist laws (the 1976 Race Relations Act has little effective power) and the feeble position of the Commission for Racial Equality. On an ideological level, racism has been given an intellectual credibility through the work of certain psychologists and educationalists, which has permeated through to attitudes within the schools. Culturally, the mass media still blesses racist humour and black stereotypes. The labour movement too has failed to challenge racism within the working class, or adjusted its structures and practices to allow for the active inclusion of black workers.

All these facts have created an 'institutionalisation' of racism, whereby racist ideas and practices have become embodied in and

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sanctioned by the state and popular authorities. In addition the black population has been subject to various racist attacks over the years, from Notting Hill onwards.

The black community's response to this experience has been to develop community-based organisations, such as local youth, educational and church projects. Black community centres have been set up which act as a focus for youth groups, cultural activities and, especially, the Saturday school movement (the black community's attempt to redress the balance of racism within the educational system by teaching its children its own culture in a black atmosphere).

For those used to labour movement organisations, based on national bodies with well-defined structures and elected leaderships, it might appear that the black population lacks any recognisable

organisation.⁴ Yet these developments at the level of black community politics do represent a movement that is nationwide. National co-ordination does occur from time to time, but not usually on any permanent or long-standing basis (although one exception has been the Organisation of Women of African and Asian Descent, a black women's liberation movement, now in its third year, which significantly involves both Asian and Afro-Caribbean origin women).

The growth of this black political movement has not precluded black people from participating in the traditional structures of the labour movement. Blacks traditionally are Labour voters. Proportionately more black workers than white join trade unions. Black Labour Party members are now beginning to be adopted as candidates for safe seats such as GLC councillor Paul Boetang and Brent councillor Merle Amory. However, in the context of the events at St Paul's and Brixton it is the growing sense of black autonomy, rather than growing black participation in labour movement organisations, which is of significance.

An indication of this new sense of autonomy was seen in black Londoners' reaction to the Deptford fire. Anger about both the 13 deaths and police handling of the case led to the largest ever demonstration by young blacks. The 10,000 who marched the 10 miles from Deptford to Hyde Park, on a Monday, were in effect striking in protest at racial violence. This protest took place six weeks before the Brixton revolt.

Recession and the inner-city

Not only do the communities in St Paul's and Brixton experience racist attack, but they also suffer from the economic and social deprivation of the inner city. St Paul's and Brixton are typical examples of the de-industrialised inner city economies which have grown up as the economy nationally has been declining.⁵ Whilst special state assistance has been given to those regions which have lost traditional heavy industry, little attention has been paid to the flight of industry from the apparently prosperous cities, such as London or Bristol.

Until about 20 years ago Brixton, for example, contained a mixture of large factories, small businesses and public services. Practically all large factories have now gone. The telecommunications firm Pye-TMC — part of Dutch Philips — closed as a result of foreign competition. The world famous Tannoy Products, based a few miles away in Streatham, was bought up by an American firm and relocated to a model factory in Scotland, with attractive government incentives. The rubber goods firm Sanitas was closed last year as a result of the parent company's rationalisation programme. The largest private employer in the area is Freeman Mail Order, a distribution centre employing 2,000, mainly part-time women workers.

The many small businesses — engineering, printworks and shops — have also disappeared, a process which started 10-15 years ago, but which has speeded up in the current recession. As a result, Brixton is mainly a 'welfare economy', based on local government, hospitals, schools and social services and a certain amount of other public

¹ Violent community protest has, of course, dominated Northern Ireland for many years but this violence has occurred within a community divided as well as against the repressive forces of the British state.

² 'More than 1,000 people were stopped and questioned and at least 100 arrests were made — double the normal weekly arrest rate.' (*Daily Telegraph* 13.4.81).

³ Excluding long-established black communities in areas such as Liverpool.

⁴ The Asian-origin community does however have a tradition of large scale working class organisations, which has been carried on in the various Asian Workers' Associations.

⁵ For a recently published analysis of this process see *Slump City* by Andrew Friend and Andy Metcalf (Pluto Press).

services, such as transport.

As a result, employment opportunities are scarce and unemployment is at a very high level, 12,158 were registered as unemployed in the borough of Lambeth in March. Employment opportunities for black youth are especially scarce. In April there were only 13 job vacancies registered at the Brixton careers office for 784 jobless 16-19 year olds — more than half of them black. Young blacks are two to three times more likely than young whites to be unemployed (*The Times* 13.4.81).

Urban aid programmes in the 60s and 70s were not concerned with industrial strategy and thus were unable to reverse the degeneration of the inner city economy. However, the Inner City Partnership Programme, set up by the Labour government in 1977, did attempt to include the rebuilding of industry in its assistance to areas such as Brixton. This programme, with its partnership of central and local government *and* the community, also had potential for the involvement of all sections in local planning (albeit small scale and piecemeal).

However, since the election of the Tories in 1979 there has been a reversal in even this modest programme of regeneration. Inner city areas with left Labour administrations (such as Lambeth, the London borough which includes Brixton) have been singled out as special targets for punitive measures. These have included cutbacks to the Partnership Programme, the Local Government Act's attack on council autonomy, central government cuts and pressure to increase the rates. Measures such as these put possible regeneration of areas like Brixton even further into the distance. One notable victim has been the Brixton Leisure Centre. Because of the cuts, its completion is not possible. In an area where recreation facilities hardly exist, this half-built sports centre towers over the streets where the revolt of April 10-12 took place.

Non-community policing

Racism, the growth of black consciousness and the economic degeneration of multiracial inner city areas are key factors underlying the explosions at St Paul's and Brixton. But it needed the additional factor of police harassment to trigger both of these revolts. Constant harassment has come with the depersonalisation of the police in these areas — communities no longer know who their police officers are. The police have become more of an alien force, both in their methods and their lack of identity with the communities they patrol. To impose their authority they thus need to resort to the type of forceful actions which provoked both revolts.

These developments have occurred as part of the process of politicisation of the police since the time Sir Robert Mark was Metropolitan Police Commissioner.⁶ The emphasis has shifted from police foot patrols based in specific neighbourhoods to the police station and the panda car. Instead of crime prevention and detection there emerged crime reaction. This 'fire brigade' method concentrates on mass police reactions to public incidents. It is backed up by 'saturation' policing, when large numbers of police, often the entire Special Patrol Group within a region, are drafted into an area. This new style of policing is dependent on high technology to support it, including computers, two way radio, video recorders and helicopter surveillance. It has also emerged as police chiefs have been assuming a more public political role, a trend again dating from the days of Mark. The practice has been adopted not just by authoritarian police chiefs, such as Manchester's James Anderton, but also those with more liberal views such as Devon and Cornwall's John Alderson. Whether authoritarian or liberal, the power of such men is outside the check of police committees. At present, these are the only bodies made up of both police and representatives of local authorities which can consider police matters. They are however bereft of powers to decide on

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methods of policing, or to call chief constables to account.⁷

All communities have been affected by these developments in policing, but none more so than the multiracial inner cities. The police designate these as 'high crime' areas, and therefore prone to saturation policing. Police stereotyping of black youth as criminals, the use of laws such as Sus and the harassment and criminalisation of sections of the black community have been documented in studies by the Institute of Race Relations *Police against black people* and Lambeth council's inquiry into the police.

The latter was set up as a result of longstanding concern about trends in police-community relations in the Brixton area. Not only has there been the daily harassment of individuals, but the whole community has suffered from large scale and spectacular tours of duty from the Special Patrol Group. There have been eight such exercises since 1975. The most provocative of these, in December 1978, included 1,000 stop-and-searches, 430 arrests and road blocks. A particularly insensitive incident soon after, when police detained black community relations workers, led the Lambeth council to set up its inquiry into police-community relations in the borough. This inquiry published its report⁸ just 10 weeks before the revolt. It documented then the degree of harassment of the black community, and the effects of this on homes and families. The extent of the alienation of the police from the community is particularly striking in the widespread use of militaristic metaphors:

Black people 'have always to be repairing their windows, barricading their doors, they live under a *state of siege*. The whole time' (white woman).

'The lack of trust is highlighted in young males and adolescents, both black and white. When talking to these young people one gets the impression of *guerilla warfare*' (social workers).

'The general tide of criticism has inspired a *siege mentality* on the part of the police and its spokesmen' (Labour Party).

'They don't approach you like they're a peace officer, they're more like *mar officers*' (black bus driver).

'Police raided the youth club about 8pm . . . they burst in like *commandos in Africa*' (youth workers).

The military parallel is also recognised by the police. Former Lambeth police commander Adams explained in a TV interview why he had not informed the then existing police-community liaison committee about a forthcoming SPG exercise thus: 'no good general ever declares his forces in a prelude to any kind of attack'.

The term used in the Lambeth report, 'army of occupation', indicates a widespread reaction in the community. For many the police are an alien force who have no connection or sympathy with the area, who are hostile to and interfere with the daily way of living for that community, and who operate not to protect that community, but to attack its members and its very existence. The situation described in the inquiry report led to an article on the front page of Lambeth council's free newspaper headed, 'Act now to prevent race explosion'. (*Lambeth Local* Feb/March 1981).

THE RESPONSES

The disturbances in St Paul's had the shock of the new; similar disturbances in Brixton however indicated a trend, a development which could be repeated again and elsewhere.

The immediate reaction from the Government was to defend the role of the police and condemn the violence. Thatcher rejected the



idea that unemployment could be a cause. Many Labour politicians who commented on the events had a different reaction. Local MP John Fraser talked of the 'devastating distrust and discontent' which the events indicated. Lambeth council leader Ted Knight blamed the effects of the Tory government's penalising cuts in causing the revolt. The trade union movement — both the TUC and locally — expressed its concern about the background of unemployment. The Communist Party issued a statement condemning the police presence and the rundown of the inner cities. The black community's reaction was solid support for the front line youth.

Within a few days of the events, the Government announced the setting up of an inquiry under Section 32 of the 1964 Police Act, to be conducted by Lord Scarman. Inquiries are a traditional government reaction to an explosive situation. They operate as 'cooling off' mechanisms, whilst appearing to express genuine government concern to investigate the facts. Both Labour and Tory politicians called for an inquiry into Brixton. Although there was disquiet that the inquiry was to be conducted by one individual and not a panel, the choice of Scarman was at least tactful. His reputation as a more 'liberal' member of the judiciary was borne out in his decision to widen the scope of the inquiry to cover not just the facts of the revolt itself, but also to look at the background to 'the problems of policing in multiracial communities'. Although this extension satisfied the initial criticisms of some Labour politicians, it angered some in the community. The new terms appeared to place the onus on the multiracial community rather than the police. This apprehension about the inquiry was also fed by two additional factors: Scarman's remark in a radio interview that it's only when black and white 'are driven into groups when the herd instinct takes over, that trouble occurs' (*Guardian* 15.5.81); and his refusal to allow certain applicants to be legally represented before him, including the NCCL and the Communist Party. As a result, there has been a semi-boycott of his inquiry with black organisations, the local trades council, the GLC

and Communist Party refusing to take part.

Apart from setting up the Scarman inquiry, the Government's other immediate response was to refuse Lambeth council's request for cash aid and greater long term investment. There was however an offer of compensation to those whose property had been damaged, earning the Government some support from local traders and businessmen.

The monetarist 'penalisation' policy was summed up in Thatcher's statement that: 'sometimes too much money does not help to solve problems. It causes more trouble.' (*The Times* 14.4.81).

The police reaction

At Brixton the police were able to test the method of saturation policing to its limits. But a massive police presence in the face of an angry community was unable to control the streets. One immediate police reaction was to demand better equipment and riot training and Home Secretary Whitelaw responded by setting up a review of these matters. Some sections of the police wanted to go further than simply better equipment. Police Federation chairman Jim Jardine said: 'the traditional role of the British policeman can no longer be maintained and a more offensive posture is needed.' Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir David McNee called for the reintroduction of the 18th century riot act, which would allow mass arrests of any large assembly of people. The Police Federation conference, however, chose not to discuss its attitude towards public order law before Scarman reported.

Scarman's report will herald the next round in the public order debate. The debate concerns not just legislation. There is also the

⁶ See *The Political Police in Britain* by Tony Bunyan and *Policing the 80s* by State Research.

⁷ See State Research Bulletin No 23.

⁸ *Final Report of the Working Party into Community/Police Relations in Lambeth*, £4.00 Lambeth Town Hall, Brixton Hill, London SW2.

controversy (within the state) as to whether Britain should have a paramilitary 'third force', especially trained to deal with civil unrest — along the lines of the CRS in France and the US National Guard. The dominant view so far has been that any special training should be incorporated within the ranks of the existing police force. Whilst this debate has been going on, there has been a significant development of intra-state liaison happening on the ground in the area of civil contingency planning. The Civil Contingencies Unit was set up after

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the miners' strike in 1973 to co-ordinate police, armed forces and security services response to civil emergencies. A military liaison duty officer (a naval captain) was in fact posted in Brixton police station over the weekend of the revolt.

The Left's reaction

For the Left in Lambeth, the Brixton revolt came as no great surprise. The Labour Party, trade union movement, Communist Party and the many other groups on the Left have long been aware of the police treatment of the black community in an area beset with inner city decline. For this reason, the last three SPG exercises in the area have been met with concerted opposition, which includes the Labour council leadership, the trades council and the Left parties. But alongside this protest at police activity, there have also been more positive attempts to rebuild the area, through participation in the inner city partnership programme, the umbrella group of voluntary organisations, the neighbourhood councils, a Lambeth Co-operative Development Agency as well as within the trades council and tenants' bodies. All of these activities have been severely curtailed by central government cuts; the need to fight back against the cuts, whilst maintaining a Labour council committed to serving the needs of a multiracial inner city, has been a dominant feature in local politics. The immediate reaction to the Brixton revolt was thus to place it in this context.

But this process of making the connections between Tory cuts and the anger of black youth does have limitations. Although cuts have not helped to regenerate Brixton and alleviate the problems which spark off discontent, to reduce the black reaction to the question of fighting the cuts does not help forge alliances with the black community. The translation of the black experience into what sections of the Left tend to identify as 'real' politics is to do a disservice to the black community and its specific oppression. This lack of sensitivity to the black community's experiences was especially marked at a defence meeting held after the weekend. Instead of listening to the experiences of the black youth involved, certain groups attempted to lecture the black community on what it should be doing eg, building community councils (Workers Revolutionary Party), smashing the Tory state (Revolutionary Communist Tendency) and other such all-purpose litanies. Because of this mechanistic response, other sections of the Left, perhaps fearing accusations of racism, were able to do little more than respond to the immediate demands of the black community, such as raising funds. The Left response thus fell into a dilemma between the all-purpose every-issue-leads-to-revolution approach and the let's-wait-and-see-what-the-black-community-wants-us-to-do approach. This dilemma has arisen because of the Left's failure to recognise the autonomous black movement and to build alliances with it as well as failing adequately to challenge its own racist ideas and practices. As a result the Left has been unable to associate these new developments with its traditional strengths in a way which can

advance the concerns of both blacks and whites in the inner cities.

The black community's reaction

For the black community probably the most striking reaction to the Brixton revolt was the solidarity it created. Solidarity in Brixton between parents and children, and solidarity of *all* the black communities in Britain with the people of Brixton; the youngsters on the Brixton front line were fighting back on behalf of the community as a whole.

However, for ultra left sections of the black community, such as that associated with the *Race Today* collective, the front line youth were identified as revolutionaries, heralding an uprising of spontaneous and violent revolts by black youth throughout the inner cities. This familiar position of spontaneous revolution is also combined with a black separatism which is opposed to alliances with other oppressed sections.

Broader sections of the black community — educational, youth and church organisations and those working in the labour movement — have a more positive response of wanting to move towards greater organisation of black people. Experiences from the Asian sections of the black community have shown that this is possible, with the formation of Bengali and Southall youth movements, and the massive anti-racist protests held in Coventry in May. These sections of the black community are developing an autonomous movement which the Left must listen to and make alliances with.

The white community and law and order

For many whites in the inner cities, the reaction to the Brixton events was to demand more law and order. These demands have been seriously neglected by the Left, who associate them almost exclusively with authoritarian Tory ideology. Yet crime is a common feature of inner city life, including burglary, bag snatching, sexual assault and racist attack. Although the Left has taken up the issue of police harassment of the black community, it has failed to deal with other wide concerns. In this vacuum, those elements of Tory ideology which call for tough action for muggers and vandals do have some impact on the white community — even though the Tories neglect to comment on the police's inability or unwillingness to detect and clear up crimes or recover property.

Failure to develop policies on crime and the police has led to a gap in the Left's credibility within sections of the white working class. This was shown in the elections in Lambeth just a month after the events in Brixton. The Tories ran their campaign on the twin issues of too much rates and too little law and order. The result was a greater swing to the Tories than recorded elsewhere in London, where trends were generally in the other direction. The Tories concentrated particularly hard on maintaining their Norwood seat, which includes parts of Brixton, against the opposition of Ted Knight. This they succeeded in doing with the biggest swing in London.

Although the Tories gained votes in the elections, the National Front performed dismally. This suggests that the Brixton events have not necessarily driven the white community into a racist reaction. Rather, sections of it are seeking a solution which the Left is failing to provide.

LONGER TERM IMPLICATIONS

The events at Brixton have far-reaching implications for developments within policing, the inner cities, the black community and the Left.

Unless there are changes both in the methods which police use in multiracial communities and their degree of public accountability then such confrontations will recur, in Brixton and elsewhere.