

RIOTING ON THE MEDIA

Justin Wren-Lewis
and Alan Clarke

On Wednesday 25 November 1981, a report on the inner cities and their policing hit the headlines, as no similar report had ever done before. ITN was temporarily out of action, but both the evening BBC news programmes devoted far more time to it than usual for a headline story, while discussions of the report took up most of *Nationwide* and *Newsnight*, as well as dominating the news in the following morning's press. Yet, as we approach the anniversary of what the *Daily Express* called 'The Riot that shook Britain', the problems of the inner cities and their



only just begun' (ITN). These questions were amplified following further troubles in July. As the debates about why it happened continued, so the quest for a voice to provide an authoritative answer, a solution redefining right and wrong became more urgent. Lord Scarman was seen to be that voice. When Scarman reported, the story closed like a judicial sentence once the verdict has been given.

In this context, it is not surprising that the Report received so much publicity and so little criticism. Even the editorial comments in the national press agree that the report was, as the *Telegraph* put it, 'mostly sensible', despite some qualms from the *Express* and *Daily Mail* about the concept of positive discrimination. The contradictory elements of the Report allowed commentators of various political persuasions to adopt Scarman's truths to support their own. Thus, when Timothy Raison and Roy Hattersley discussed the Report on *Newsnight*, both were keen to stress their differences lay not with its findings, but with their interpretations of those findings — like theologians debating Biblical admonitions.

It was as if Scarman was the only investigation of its kind (exhaustive rather than partial) rather than merely one of many. From this privileged position Scarman was able to discredit other reports. On *Nationwide*, he unambiguously implied (an inference taken up by the *Telegraph*) that the report commissioned by Lambeth Council under David Turner Samuels QC 'had created a tremendous amount of tension and hostility toward the police in January . . . and then there was a build up from then' to the April riots.

Because Scarman was seen to provide the last word on the problems of Britain's inner cities, the story completely disappeared from the news headlines the following day, and has been seen little since. This allowed the Police Federation to get away with a rapid conversion to the notion of an independent complaints procedure, and then a retraction once the Scarman Report had left the limelight.

To have presented the Report as the truth was to overlook contradictions inherent in the Report itself — like the disassociation between social conditions and government spending — and the limitations of the Report — crucially, a large number of significant groups boycotted the whole proceedings. By attempting to use Scarman to close the news story of the Summer of Discontent, the opportunity to learn from the Report and to open the area to more public scrutiny seems to have been lost in television. Q

policing, after the brief blaze of publicity following the publication of the Scarman Report, have left the news headlines.

This silence tells us much about the character and significance of the news media's treatment of Scarman's findings; treatment that failed to question either the report's importance or its authoritative status. Two important factors facilitated this celebration of Scarman; firstly, the nature of its *visual* representation, and, more generally, the position it occupied in relation to the summer riots, a narrative it succeeded in closing.

The Scarman Report had two main concerns — the social conditions fermenting unrest in Britain's inner cities, and the character of policing in those areas. Yet, when both television and the press reproduced the Report as a news story, the pictures and film footage used gave it a quite different orientation. Viewers and readers were subjected to a plethora of shots of dramatic riot scenes from Brixton and Toxteth. Rather than broadening the Report out and looking at the wider implication of the findings, the immediacy of the visuals — of the rioting, the looting and of the violence — pull us back into the problems of law and order, of maintaining peace on our streets. This visual commentary is extremely seductive — it seems to remind us of the problems.

The issues at stake shift from examination of societal problems toward straightforward recrimination. The questions surrounding urban poverty and policing methods become a question of guilt — who did Scarman blame for the riots? BBC News opened the Scarman story by answering this very question, while the headline of the *Daily Star*, for example, screamed 'GUILTY' in block capitals across its front page, above a riot scene photograph.

Two notable exceptions demonstrate that the Scarman story could have been signified with far more appropriate visuals. In a centre page feature in the *Daily Star*, the

story of Sonia, a black inhabitant of Brixton, was illustrated with a shot through a window of derelict, run down South London, while BBC's *Newsnight* used a long camera shot panning along one of Brixton's less than salubrious streets.

Television news was also conspicuous in its failure to use appropriate film to signify racist or oppressive policing. Although instances of racial harassment have been filmed — following, for example, the police raid on Brixton's Railton Road in the summer — this film was ignored. When summarising Scarman's recommendations, we were shown pictures of policemen standing on a street corner to represent the caption condemning racial prejudice, of policemen bearing riot shields over a caption advocating reform of the police complaints procedure. The conditions described in the Report were referred to but not seen. The news coverage in this respect failed to make the distinction between what lies behind the Scarman Report as a news story — the riots — and what constituted the substance of the Report itself — namely, problems in the day to day policing of areas like Brixton.

This leads us on to a more general point concerning the position of the Scarman story in a much longer narrative. The Scarman Report heralded the much anticipated *end* of a new story, a story that had begun its television life six months earlier on April 11, the first night of the rioting in Brixton. Although, for many, the disturbances in Brixton formed part of a history of deprivation and poor policing, their appearance on our TV screens came as if from out of the blue. The absence of this history on television gave the riot an enigmatic quality.

Both BBC and ITN ended their news reports that evening with questions rather than answers — 'The arguments about why and how the violence erupted will continue . . . (BBC); 'on a night when nearly fifty police have been injured, the questions have