

# 1981: The Summer of Discontent

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*Smouldering ruins after anti-racist riots in Brixton (1981)*

This year marks the thirtieth anniversary of some of the worst civil disorders in Britain. In 1981, one by one, the inner-city areas of London, Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham erupted in flames as street battles broke out between police and youths.

The first commemoration of the events of 1981 was held in April 2011 in Brixton, located in south London. Community groups and activists gathered to remember but also to reflect on what has changed since then. One positive outcome of the unrest was that it foregrounded the social problems and institu-

tional racism experienced by many black British Britons at the time. As a result, attitudes towards race and policing were re-evaluated and government policies were introduced in an attempt to address some of these issues. Today, Brixton, once regarded as a no-go ghetto by some, is an upwardly mobile, multicultural neighbourhood.

## *British cities go up in flames*

The year 1981 did not have an auspicious beginning. On January 18, thirteen

young black men and women died in a fire at a house in New Cross, south London during a party held to celebrate teenager Yvonne Rud-dock's 16th birthday. At the time, the part of London where the blaze occurred was a stronghold of the racist National Front, a far-right organization which had threatened arson attacks against members of the black community. Because of this, many in the black community believed that the fire was the result of racially-motivated arson. When the police refused to investigate these allegations, thousands took to the streets to demonstrate against what they perceived to be a cover-up.<sup>1</sup>

Tensions between the police and the community had already escalated into riots in April the previous year following a police raid on a café in St Pauls, an area of Bristol with a large African Caribbean population. When trials relating to this incident were held in February and March 1981, British MP Enoch Powell warned of a racial civil war in Britain.<sup>2</sup> At around the same time, police launched a crackdown on street crime in Brixton, offensively titled Operation Swamp. Over the period of a few days: almost 1000 people were stopped and questioned: and more than half of the 118 people arrested were black. On April 10 a policeman stopped a young black man who was bleeding heavily. Although the officer was apparently trying to help him, the young man was quickly surrounded by a group of black youths and ran away. False rumours then spread that he had been prevented from getting treatment and had died as a result. An angry crowd accused the policeman of police brutality against a black man and began pelting the officer and his colleagues with bricks and bottles.

Tensions reached a climax the following day. The arrest of a black youth unleashed pent-up resentment at what appeared to be un-

just and overly aggressive policing. In the violent clashes that followed, police vehicles were overturned and set on fire as groups of youths, not all of them black, stormed through the streets throwing bottles and bricks, looting shops and setting fire to buildings. The rioting continued until late in the night and over the next two days, leaving more than three hundred people injured.

More clashes between the police and predominantly black youths erupted in London that month. The wave of unrest spread throughout cities across the country. In Toxteth, a neighbourhood of Liverpool with a large black population, events followed a similar pattern to those in Brixton. The treatment of a black man named Leroy Cooper by the policemen who arrested him on the evening of Friday July 3<sup>rd</sup> resulted in disturbances in which three policemen were injured. Over the weekend the situation escalated into riots which spread throughout the city and lasted for nine days, injuring several people and destroying over a hundred buildings. Youths, both black and white, threw petrol bombs, bricks and paving stones at police officers in riot gear, forcing them to retreat. The police retaliated by firing CS gas directly at rioters, causing serious injuries. Disaffected white youths from other parts of the city joined in the fighting and created disturbances in other areas.

As in Brixton, tensions had been rising over a period of time in the Liverpool inner city. The Merseyside police, like their London counterparts, had been stopping and searching young predominantly black men. There had also been incidents of police harassment and the planting of drugs. Police chief Kenneth Oxford denied that social issues or racism were behind the violence, instead dismissing them as vicious attacks on the police. Never-

theless, as in Brixton, there was no doubt that one of the immediate causes was police harassment.

As the riots died down in Toxteth, disturbances broke out in Moss Side, an area of Manchester with a large ethnic minority population. Heavy handed policing in other cities heightened existing tensions amongst the African Caribbean majority in those areas, provoking riots in the Handsworth area of Birmingham and Chapeltown in Leeds. In July and August, there was also a spate of attacks by far right groups targeting black and multicultural organisations.

Tension between the forces of the law and the black community remained tense throughout much of the decade. Over the next four years there were further outbursts. In 1985, a riot in Brixton followed the police shooting of a black woman named Cherry Groce when they entered her house to look for her son. Later the same year another black woman, Cynthia Jarrett, collapsed and died while police searched her home for stolen property. This caused an outbreak of rioting in Tottenham, north London during which one policeman died.

*'If there is no struggle, there is no progress'*

The riots of the 1980s acted as a wake-up call. Some reacted with surprise, as they believed that the second generation of black Britons was well integrated into society. The riots had broken out in areas that, although they had significant black populations, did not resemble the segregated ghettos of the United States. Black and white working class people lived, worked and often socialized together. Indeed, in most cases, both black and white youths clashed with police during the riots. Nevertheless, heavy handed policing of

the black community was clearly a trigger. A police officer at the time has recently admitted that young black men in Brixton were routinely framed, beaten up and tortured. He stated that 'I was turned from a pretty decent 18-year-old into a violent, racist thug.' He also said black suspects were often physically hurt in the interview room until they admitted to crimes.<sup>3</sup>

Others saw the riots as a time bomb waiting to go off due to underlying causes that included racial discrimination, poverty and dilapidated housing. The early 1980s was a time of high unemployment and more than half of young black men had no job. Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher dismissed suggestions that unemployment and racism lay at the root of the Brixton disturbances. A public inquiry into the causes of the riots was set up, however, with the aim of preventing further disorder. The inquiry, chaired by Lord Scarman, reported in November 1981 that, although young people from various ethnic groups were involved, the disturbances were 'essentially an outburst of anger and resentment by young black people against the police'.<sup>4</sup> The Scarman Report criticised the heavy-handed approach to policing in Brixton and found unquestionable evidence of the disproportionate and indiscriminate use of 'stop and search' powers by the police against black people. Lord Scarman argued that urgent action was needed to prevent racial disadvantage becoming an endemic, ineradicable disease threatening the very survival of our society'.<sup>5</sup> The Report recommended widespread changes to police training and law enforcement. This brought the end to the 'sus' laws, under which anyone could be stopped and searched under suspicion of intending to commit a crime. It also led to a new code for police behaviour in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act

of 1984, and the setting up of an independent Police Complaints Authority in 1985.

In an attempt to address some of the disproportionate social disadvantage among inner city ethnic minority communities, the government announced the creation of an Inner City Task Force with a £90m budget. Local authorities were now required to engage with ethnic minorities and to consult with them on drawing up equal opportunities policies. The councils also established race relations units and gave grants to minority groups.

One consequence of the riots was that many black people became politicized. *The Voice*, a newspaper aimed at the black British community, was launched at the Notting Hill Carnival in 1982. In 1985, Bernie Grant became the first ethnic minority leader of a London Council (Haringey) and two years later, he was one of the first four people from an ethnic minority to be elected to the British Parliament since 1922.

### *Over-Policed and Under-Protected*

The events of the 1980s and the Scarman Report confirmed that black and minority ethnic communities were subject to heavy handed policing and also that the police often failed to respond effectively to racially motivated attacks. A decade later, these issues came to the fore once again this time as a consequence of the racist murder of a black teenager. On April 23 1993, Stephen Lawrence was stabbed to death in an unprovoked attack by a gang of white youths as he waited at a bus stop in Eltham, south-east London, with his friend Duwayne Brooks. Within 24 hours of his murder, police had the names of five suspects, yet no arrests were made for two weeks. During this time, the suspects were able to destroy evidence, concoct alibis, and intimidate witnesses.

A public inquiry into the affair, which only began in 1999, several years after the incident, focused on the flawed investigation into the murder and on the investigation of racially motivated crimes in general. The inquiry, chaired by Sir William Macpherson, found the murder investigation had been affected by 'a combination of professional incompetence, institutional racism and a failure of leadership by senior officers'.<sup>6</sup> Noting that recommendations of the 1981 Scarman Report had been ignored, Macpherson highlighted a general lack of trust and confidence in the police amongst ethnic minorities and that 'the experience of black people over the last 30 years has been that [they] have been over policed and to a large extent under protected'.<sup>7</sup>

The Macpherson report did bring about change in the policing of ethnic minorities. The police force was required to operate according to the 1976 Race Relations Act (from which it had previously been exempted) with a duty to implement racially-sensitive policies. Since then, there have been improvements in police and community relations in the inner cities. Today, in Brixton, policing tactics have changed. Rising numbers of black officers has helped; there are now 114 ethnic minority officers in the area as opposed to just nine in 1981. But despite the checks, there are still instances of heavy handed and often racist policing. A national study concluded that black people remain 26 times more likely to be stopped than white people.<sup>8</sup> Recalling previous instances of black people dying in police custody, reggae and rap musician Smiley Culture (David Victor Emmanuel) died on the 15<sup>th</sup> of March, in 2011, from a reportedly self-inflicted knife wound while Metropolitan police officers were searching his home.

## *What has Changed?*

The unrest in the 1980s confirmed Frederick Douglass' observation: 'If there is no struggle, there is no progress' by placing the concerns of Black Britons center stage. Over the last three decades, a number of government initiatives have pumped money into the inner cities, bringing about redevelopment and regeneration of the areas. However, the main beneficiaries are not always those who rioted or even their children and grandchildren. Nowadays, Brixton is no longer a predominantly black area. With good public transport that links into central London, this has attracted an influx of other minorities and young upwardly mobile professionals. Major retail outlets that withdrew from the area after the 1981 riots have now returned.

Yet there are some disturbing parallels between current conditions and those of 1981. Unemployment has risen steeply, especially among young people, and in the case of black youth it now stands at almost 50%.<sup>9</sup> Unlike earlier generations of black Britons, with no jobs, this generation has little chance of buying increasingly expensive property in their own area of the city. There continue to be high levels of black imprisonment and many black boys are excluded from school. The recent recession and the government policies implemented to deal with it seem likely to affect ethnic minorities disproportionately. Cuts in public spending have resulted in fewer jobs in the public sector, which employs over 30% of ethnic minority workers. Government services targeting this sector have also been cut. This is already affecting social mobility and will have inevitable consequences for social inequality.

## Notes:

- 1-BBC On This Day: 1981: Nine die in New Cross house fire, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/18/newsid\\_2530000/2530333.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/january/18/newsid_2530000/2530333.stm)
- 2-A Different Reality: minority struggle in British cities, <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/CRER/differentreality/timeline.html>
- 3-Davey, Ed. 'Brixton riots 30 years on: What has changed?' <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-13004915>
- 4-The Brixton disorders 10-12 April 1981 : report of an enquiry. London: HMSO, 1981 , p. 45.
- 5-Q&A: The Scarman Report, BBC news 27 April 2004. [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/bbc\\_parliament/3631579.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/bbc_parliament/3631579.stm)
- 6-The Stephen Lawrence Enquiry 1999, para 46.1 <http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/sli-46.htm>
- 7-The Stephen Lawrence Enquiry 1999, para 45.7. <http://www.archive.official-documents.co.uk/document/cm42/4262/sli-46.htm>
- 8-Townsend, Mark. 'Black people are 26 times more likely than whites to face stop and search', The Observer 17 October 2010. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/oct/17/stop-and-search-race-figures>
- 9-'Recession leaves almost half young black people unemployed, finds ippr', 20 January 2010. <http://www.ippr.org.uk/pressreleases/?id=3846>