

## COMMENTARY By DR. DHANPAUL NARINE

# Race in Britain: English by Day, Others by Night?

In 1980 as the British were glued to their television sets two forces were competing for national attention. The first relates to the English athletes in the Moscow Olympics. One of the most prominent was the black athlete Daley Thompson who won the gold medal in the decathlon. Thompson would go on to win the gold again at Los Angeles in 1984. Tessa Sanderson was the first black woman to win an Olympic gold for Britain. She went on to compete in six Olympic games.

As these and other black athletes brought glory to their country the media, including the BBC, kept reminding Britain, and the rest of the world, about the prowess of the stars. In several of the BBC reports the 'English girl' Sanderson that was leading the pack was black and she born in Jamaica in the West Indies. But that was of little concern in the euphoria.

The second force that caught the attention of the British public was race relations and more specifically the unrest that occurred on the streets. While the media embraced the black athletes that had wrapped themselves in the Union Jack, it was also playing the race hate game to incite anger and to turn public opinion against minorities.

In other words the black medal winners were English by day. However, when blacks took to the streets to protest against police harassment they became 'dreadful West Indians, bloody foreigners or an unruly mob.' Despite years of black settlement in Britain the majority of whites has not been able to come to terms with its dark strangers, its colored population. What is disappointing is that the authorities make little effort to understand race. There are reports upon reports after the race riots but the recommendations are not implemented with vigor.

Color is powerful. It attracts, defines and divides. Scholars in America have pointed out that color would be a most important factor to affect relations in that country. W.E.B. DuBois said in 1900 that the 'color line

would be the problem of the twentieth century.' Color for him is intertwined with race and class and calls our attention to the inequities of power, wealth, opportunity and access.

It was a rainy August day in 1980. We were at the Finsbury Park station in North London. The 210 bus pulled off and the young man and his mother joined the line to buy tickets for the underground. A group of police officers pulled up at the station and was eyeing the line. The rookie cop was about to have his first encounter with a black youth. Encouraged by the other officers the cop pounced on the youth and pulled him out of the line as the mother screamed. They found nothing on him but their act drew a further wedge of suspicion and hate between the communities. These behaviors would boil into street unrest and riots.

There is no question that race runs like a river colored red in Britain. The Institute of Race Relations points out that some of the post-war disturbances as early as 1958 were seen as race riots. In 1980 there was widespread discontent in the black community that led to riots in St. Paul's in Bristol. A year later riots occurred in major cities including Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester.

One would have thought that policies would be implemented to bring discontent to the

table. But this did not happen. When the police burst into the home of Cynthia Jarrett they found no stolen property; Jarrett suffered a heart attack and died. Riots followed at Broadwater Farm and a policeman Keith Blakelock was killed. This was in 1985, four years after the Brixton riots and the Scarman Report.

The examples that were provided show that racism and racist attitudes formed a deep and unhealthy policy in the British police force. According to an LSE study in 2003, 'for some commentators policing British minority ethnic communities was merely an

riot in Brixton. Operation 'Swamp 81' led to a heavy presence of police officers in black communities. A fire on New Cross Road in Deptford resulted in the deaths of 13 young black youths. The fire was thought to be set 'by a white racist but the police investigation failed to arrest anyone connected to the fire furthering anger in the black community.'

Lord Scarman in his report of the 1981 riots stated that blacks faced problems in the inner cities and that these problems included education, unemployment and discrimination. These have led to frustration and deprivation and according to the report the riots

of the Scarman Report were not fully implemented. The result was that economic deprivation and police harassment opened the door to the possibility of more unrest. This occurred in 2011 in Tottenham and quickly spread to other cities. A study by Oxford University found that there were tensions caused by the action of the police. The view from the locals in Tottenham was that, 'ethnic profiling in police stop and search tactics was one of the key factors ruining the already-damaged police and community relationship in London.'

There were comparisons that were made between the 1981 and 2011 riots. Both occurred under Conservative governments and they were said to be spontaneous. The police force was seen as the object of resentment and in both cases the government described the riots as a law and order problem. But unlike the 1981 riots there was no Michael Heseltine to send to conduct an enquiry into the causes of the riots.

In a visit to Liverpool after the Toxteth riots in 1981 Heseltine reported, 'there is undoubtedly a serious breakdown of confidence between a great part of the population of the area and the police.' Heseltine's speech in Parliament was hyped up to be a blueprint for race relations by some Conservatives but it fizzled out into little.

Scarman in his report had called for the administration to be more sensitive to the needs of the black population. One of his recommendations was the hiring of more black cops in the force as this might help to break down barriers. It is interesting to note that black police officers were complaining of harassment and discrimination. The Macpherson Report of 1999 found institutional racism in the police force. Despite its recommendations the number of black recruits into the police force actu-



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ally fell.

According to the LSE study, 'the most common specific reason for the resignation of black and Asian officers were poor management within the police force, domestic/personal reasons, the difficulties of integration into occupational culture and frustration with the way supervisory and senior officers dealt with everyday racist banter, and the aggressive policing of ethnic minorities.'

Given the examples of race and riots where do we go from here? The Guardian reported in October 2015 that Metropolitan police officers faced more than 240 complaints of racial discrimination 'but none of these was upheld.' London has a new Mayor and his name is Sadiq Khan. This 'Obama moment' for London is historic both for its symbolism and for its practical policy applications. It is interesting to note that Khan has accused the Conservatives of using the race card in the elections.

Khan says, 'David Cameron and Zac Goldsmith used fear and innuendo to try to turn different ethnic and religious groups against each other—something straight out of the Donald Trump playbook.' Khan has promised to make housing more affordable, freeze transport fares for four years, make London safer and reduce pollution in his city. Khan's election is a credit to Londoners as most who voted for him were non-Muslims. He is well poised to make a run for the leadership of the Labour Party in 2020. But first he has to tackle the problems of his city including race, color and extremism and it won't be easy.

May the force of Leicester City be with him!

The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer and do not necessarily represent the views of the THE WEST INDIAN.



A black policeman in London. Is he English by day and West Indian by night?

extension of colonial policing which has existed for decades in the Caribbean, India, and Africa and which had now been turned inward to police domestic colonies.'

Immigration has been at the center of British social policy for decades and it has affected race relations. The Immigration Act of 1971 wasn't only about border controls. The Act empowered the police to randomly raid businesses and look for illegal residents. One of the conclusions of the Institute of Race Relations Report in 1979 was that 'police officers demonstrated little regard for the civil liberties for black and Asian people.' There were arbitrary arrests, indiscriminate attacks by the police, forced entry and violence, particularly in cities such as London and Birmingham.

In 1981 a combination of reasons led to a

'were a spontaneous reaction to what was seen as police harassment.' Scarman found further that the Metropolitan Police was not racist but that 'racial prejudice does manifest itself occasionally in the behaviour of a few officers on the streets.' He concluded controversially that 'institutional racism does not exist in Britain.'

The Conservative government, under Margaret Thatcher, was fed the story that the 'unrest was a criminal exercise carried out by selfish, greedy and idle youths.' The media was influential in projecting a contradictory image of race. The 'Sun' newspaper said that Britain was poisoned by race while the 'Mirror' said if the recommendations were shelved 'there will be blood' and the 'Guardian' thundered that Britain 'was at the edge of an abyss.'

The recommendations