

After Scarman: 1

The evolution of an official explanation

Lord Scarman has reported. But, Martin Kettle asks, does that end the question of what caused the riots?

One strand of the gratitude that was heaped upon Lord Scarman last week was relief. It was not, however, relief about this or that particular recommendation, nor was it relief that Scarman had either "got it right" or "got it wrong." It was relief that the report was now out, and that there was An Official Answer to all those tricky questions like, "What were the causes of the riots?" After Scarman there is now an answer. After Scarman, we can stop thinking.

Since Brixton—and even more, since the July riots—different parts of British society have been stumbling and groping through their own particular assumptions in the search for an explanation of the riots. The uncertainties of the quest are not by any means dishonourable. The riots really did surprise a lot of people. The past months have been a period in which to absorb a lot of difficult implications.

Perhaps all this confusion was most poignantly voiced less than a month ago by the leader of Greater Manchester county council, Bernard Clarke. Asked for his views of the Hytner report on the Moss Side riots, he replied: "I think that most reasonable people would assume that the riots were irrational. But there must be causes for them."

The attempt to depict the riots as irrational was very important. It denied legitimacy to the rioters, their actions and their views. It made them events without a cause, and events that therefore posed no direct threat to any existing assumption.

The Prime Minister was the most prominent exponent of this view. She saw the riots simply as a matter of criminality and indiscipline. "A large part of the problem that we are having now has come from a weakening of authority in many respects of life over many, many years," she told parliament in July. "This has got to be corrected." Nothing could justify the riots, she said in her television broadcast in the week after Toxteth. And she agreed, she said, with the *Daily Mirror*, that the riots were "a spree of naked greed"—to which the *Mirror* retorted that that was only its headline, and that the paper believed there were many serious causes of the riots.

It was a measure of Lord Scarman's personal achievement that he ploughed on through all this with his investigation of social and economic issues in Brixton. He was a social democratic rock upon which the strong waves of law and order continued to break. The Prime Minister was only one among many in her views.

In parliament, MPs of all parties saw the riots as the expression of lack of discipline. Labour's John Fraser pointed to the break-

down of the family. The SDP's Jim Wellbeloved saw the riots as "the penalty for a decade or more of undermining and subverting respect for decent authority." While the rising Thatcherite, Ray Whitney, dismissed socio-economic issues altogether. "It was sheer vandalism and criminality. It was a breakdown of the discipline of society and these are the problems we have to tackle."

One letter to the London *Standard* blamed John McEnroe's defiance of the Wimbledon umpires. Many concentrated on blaming schools. Though they were later to modify their views, police spokesmen were prominent among those who saw the riots as symptomatic of a wider anti-authoritarianism. "We are the readily identifiable symbols of authority and discipline that is anathema to these people," said Merseyside's embattled chief constable, Ken Oxford. At a press conference on 7 July, he added: "There are many people postulating views as to causes but let us not look for short-term palliatives, let's go back to basic civilised discipline."

The rank-and-file police organisation, the Police Federation, resented the search for causes. "It seems that in the view of some people," the federation chairman, Jim Jardine, told his annual conference in May, "any behaviour, no matter how criminal, can be excused if it takes place in a deprived area and the criminal elements happen to be mainly black." And one anonymous Merseyside policeman commented: "There are a lot of theories about what caused the riots. Some say it's unemployment, some say bad housing, some say it's because of the police, and some say it's political. Has anyone thought it could be old-fashioned wickedness?"

Conspiracy theorists

It is but a short stop from inherent wickedness to conspiracy. As usual when there have been riots, the conspiracy theory got a good outing this year. It culminated in the press with headlines like "SEARCH FOR THE MASKED MEN" (*Daily Mail*, 9 July), "RIOTS: FOUR MEN HUNTED" (*Standard*, 12 July) or "EXTREMISTS' MASTER PLAN FOR CHAOS" (*Daily Mail*, 12 July). The Militant Tendency, Ken Livingstone, Vanessa Redgrave, were all spotlighted at various stages. The Sunday papers even found a right-winger, "Evil Edith" Glastra.

Interestingly, none of the conspirators was ever black. Instead, as the Police Federation put it, the real problem was "well-educated activists," who were "getting young blacks to believe they are victims of police oppression." There is, of course, a

difference between conspirators and outsiders—though it is sometimes overlooked.

The Scarman report itself gives the occasional glimpse of outsiders. But overwhelmingly the evidence is that these sorts of explanations were short on facts, and long on fantasy. This has been true down the centuries. As one student of urban violence puts it: "The conspiracy theories have rarely been substantiated, yet they are common to every period and culture."

In spite of the obvious centrality of black involvement in the riots, few whites had any framework of explanation which could accommodate this fact. Thus, there was a clear tendency to regard what happened in Southall as quite separate from what happened anywhere else. The double unacceptability of premeditation and being skinheads meant that Southall could be seen as a distinct Asian reaction to white racism, even as the race element in other riots was consistently downplayed outside the black community.



KORNER

The major exception, of course, was Enoch Powell. Powell's response to Brixton was to tell the government that "they had seen nothing yet." In July, Powell was interviewed on Radio Four by John Timpson and told him: "We have had deprivation, unemployment and all the rest for generations and people have not turned out to wreck their own cities and to attack the police." No, he said, the "battle map" corresponded with "the incidence of something else," the high concentration of the black community. In time, he said, this would lead to civil war.

For some years now, Powell has been excluded from acceptable social democratic debate on race. In July, as before, MPs would begin their remarks with disclaimers that they could ever support his views. Opinion surveys, however, indicated that these views—or something like them—were shared perhaps by a quarter of the white population (though they, unlike Powell, accepted that race was not the only factor).

The relative absence of racial analysis of the riots contrasts dramatically with the vociferous attempts to explain them in terms of social and economic causes.

Liberal Conservatives were every bit as emphatic as Labour spokesmen to connect the riots with unemployment and deprivation. "Of course, you will get racial tension when you have young blacks with less chance of getting jobs," said Edward Heath. "Undoubtedly the high level of unemploy-

ment is a fruitful breeding ground for the sort of thing we are seeing," James Prior told a meeting on 10 July. "We must recognise that to have such numbers out of work leads to a disaffected people."

Nonetheless, the arch-priests of the deprivationist thesis were Labour leaders. Both Michael Foot and Roy Hattersley, the party's home affairs spokesman, argued against the setting up of the Scarman inquiry on the grounds that it should not be an inquiry into policing, but should go into employment and housing.

If anything, the deprivationists became more clamorous in July. Foot called for the extension of the Scarman inquiry to cover "the deeper causes of deprivation." The Moss Side MP, George Morton, stated that "the basic cause of the problems is unemployment." Joan Lestor, a Labour MP with a long record of anti-racist campaigning, agreed. "The causes of the riots are the economic situation, the deprivation and the lack of hope that that brings. It would be a great pity if we were to allow ourselves to sink back into platitudes and explanations that it is all a matter of race or of the National Front, the Young Socialists, or any other group of people."

In some ways the most bizarre claim was the mechanistic claim by Eric Heffer that

A trained carpenter, Cleveland Brown was born in Jamaica in 1943, and moved to Britain for work in 1961. He started painting in 1973. Here is his view of the Notting Hill carnival

"there must surely be a correlation"—can he really have meant that?—between unemployment and rioting. But Hattersley has most consistently argued the deprivationist thesis. He fits Southall into the mould: "Even the skinheads who invaded Southall last Saturday are part of the pattern of disadvantage and deprivation." And attacks on Asians: "The causes of such incidents are social and economic . . . Until the social and economic circumstances are changed, such incidents are likely to continue."

The deprivation thesis

Even after Thatcher and William Whitelaw had begun, in mid-July, to accommodate the deprivationist thesis, Hattersley emphasised: "I repeat that I do not believe that the principal cause of last week's riots was the conduct of the police. It was the conditions of deprivation and despair in the decaying areas of our old cities."

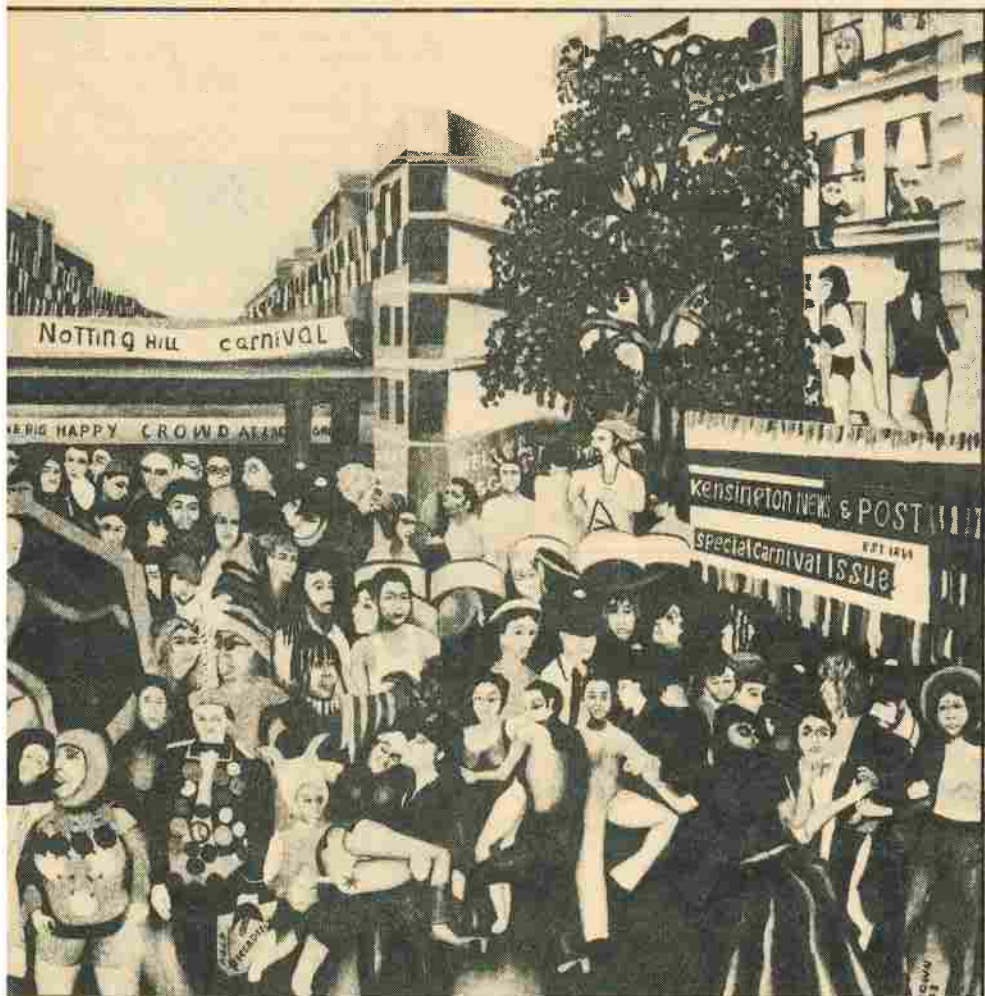
Deprivationism has been flexible—or perhaps unspecific—enough to accommodate counter-arguments. When Whitelaw argued that the presence among the rioters of school-age children showed that unemployment could not be the central issue, he was attacked by Nicholas Deakin of Birmingham University who argued that unemployment affects families as cruelly as individuals.

Opinion polls have tended to give support to the deprivationists. A MORI poll in the *Standard* after Brixton asked respondents to name the main causes of the riots. Unemployment came out top, with 40 per cent (49 per cent among blacks and Asians). Racism, bad housing and education were mentioned by less than a fifth of respondents of all races. In another MORI poll, in *The Times* in October, 62 per cent of all respondents made unemployment the main cause, well over twice as many as mentioned any other issue. Only 8 per cent mentioned bad housing and urban decay. Monday's ORC poll in the *Guardian* broadly confirmed the earlier surveys, with 48 per cent blaming unemployment, nearly twice as many as blamed any other cause.

But this is a white view. The polls show big contrasts between the blacks and whites over the importance they attach to policing. In the MORI/*Standard* poll, 33 per cent of blacks blamed police behaviour; only 13 per cent of the whole sample agreed. This contrast was confirmed in an Audience Selection poll for Capital Radio, where 37 per cent of blacks and 13 per cent of whites singled out police behaviour. Among the 13-24 age group of blacks, 52 per cent blamed the police. And while whites were more likely to blame general racial problems only 6 per cent of blacks—and as few as 3 per cent in the 13-24s—agreed.

This suggests that Scarman was much closer to the black perception when he concluded that, while the riots arose from "a complex political social and economic situation which is not special to Brixton," they were "essentially an outburst of anger and resentment by young black people against the police."

But, equally, this conclusion needs to be handled with care. Elsewhere in his report,



Lord Scarman draws an important distinction. The social, economic, and political "insecurity" of blacks and their hostility to police are not usefully described as *causes* of the riots either in Brixton or elsewhere, he says. They are, rather, "a set of social conditions which create a predisposition towards violent protest."

The activists do not draw that distinction. In Moss Side, the defence committee refused to cooperate with Hytner because they felt the causes were already clear—"indiscriminate meetings, raids, frame-ups and harassment laced with racist abuse, which the police have been dishing out to this community." Toxteth's defence committee said, "Everyone on the streets had a personal grudge against the police." Lambeth's community relations council blamed Brixton on "racist and provocative policing." And the Institute of Race Relations has said that to blame unemployment and deprivation is to ignore that "the hatred of the police is a hatred both of the culture of racism they personify and the blunt force with which that culture is maintained."

There is no doubt that some police now play up deprivationism in order to distract attention from their own role. Reacting to Scarman, the Metropolitan Police Commissioner, Sir David McNee, said he was glad that the report emphasised factors for which the police could not be held responsible.

But what of the rioters themselves? Their voices have rarely been heard. But the few personal explanations that have been recorded don't easily tally with those of the analysts and activists. "It was the thing to do. You're the ones to get," said one arrested man in Brixton, with no criminal record. Another told Manchester crown court that he had thrown a petrol bomb "to make a name for myself." In Wood Green, young rioters mentioned "police provocation," "things are so expensive," "It's that Mrs Thatcher." A young white looter in London said he "needed the money." And one of Scarman's comments may be relevant, too: "They were enjoying themselves."

Scarman has now offered an analysis on which previous explanations can now converge. There is also a danger that Scarman's prescriptions will become explanations of the causes of the riots. But it would surely be an error to see, for instance, reform of the police complaints system as much of a rioters' rallying call.

The Rudé boys?

What is needed is a modern application of the kind of analysis of the crowd attempted by historians such as George Rudé and E. P. Thompson. More attention needs to be given to the specific incidents that sparked the riots, and conclusions need to be carefully drawn from what the rioters did do and, equally important, didn't do.

Why were certain buildings burned and not others? Was the looting "naked greed" or an expression of the "moral economy" of the inner-city working class? The answers would provide a more convincing explanation of the rioters' sense of injustice than has yet been managed.

After Scarman: 2

An accumulation of blunders

C. L. R. James gives the view of a distinguished West Indian.

In the first page of his report, Lord Scarman says that the British people, during the weekend beginning 10 April, watched on their TV sets scenes of violence and disorder in their capital cities, the likes of which had not previously been seen in this century in Britain. He continues that, in the centre of Brixton, a few hundred people attacked the police, demonstrating to millions of their fellow-citizens the fragile basis of the Queen's peace. This opening is frightful enough, and later on Lord Scarman says that the police have undergone an experience unparalleled on the mainland of the United Kingdom.

It is obvious that Lord Scarman is describing events which, for him, threaten and imperil the very existence of British society. We are therefore entitled to expect a report corresponding to the magnitude of these perils. We do not get it.

Scarman lays the greatest emphasis on the police. As a result of his investigation he gives over 50 pages to the police in a report of 167 pages. He recommends doubling the length of police training to six months. He recommends also that they be instructed in the manner of dealing with ethnic minorities. He recognises that there should be compulsory training in community relations with ethnic minorities. He wants to introduce more blacks into the police force, and he recommends instant dismissal for a policeman who shows any racial prejudice or discriminatory behaviour.

He strongly recommends closer relations between the police and local communities. He believes that not only should the local community have power to investigate, but that there should also be statutory relations between it and the police. He recommends that there be independent elements in the investigation of complaints against the police, because at present there is widespread dissatisfaction and distress caused by such complaints being handled by the police themselves.

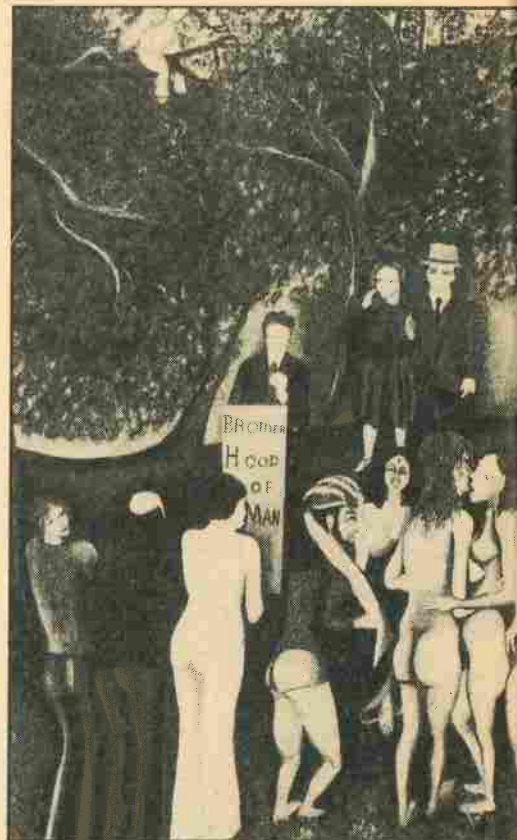
However, in London, where there is the greatest concentration of police, he does not wish that the power of the Home Secretary, to whom the local authority reports, be superseded. He recommends that a statutory framework be developed to require local consultation between the Metropolitan police and the community at borough police district level. The members of such committees should include representative police officers, elected councillors and perhaps other community representatives. It is nevertheless essential that any such local machinery should have real powers in the complaints procedure and in the inspection of the detention areas of police stations and the right

to make representations to the Metropolitan police advisory board.

Such are the main proposals for restoring order and discipline to the police force and creating a satisfactory working relationship between the police and the local community.

Unfortunately, there has been widely read and circulated in Brixton and other similar areas the following extract from page one of a volume entitled *The Fall of Scotland Yard* (Cox, Shirley and 'Short, Penguin, 1977): "The 'fall' of Scotland Yard took place between 1969 and 1972. As a result of what happened in those years, a score of London detectives went to goal, hundreds more left the force in **disgrace** and the old CID hierarchy was savagely **restructured**."

Later on the same page we read of the official inquiries: "The first was the inquiry into the allegations made by *The Times* about extortion and corruption which led to the imprisonment of two south London detectives in 1972. The second was the Lancashire police inquiry into members of the Drug Squad, which eventually resulted in the trial of six Drug Squad detectives, and the goaling of three of them, in 1973. Finally, there was the mammoth investigation by Deputy Assistant Commissioner Gilbert



Kelland into allegations of widespread corruption amongst detectives who dealt with the vice world of Soho and Mayfair."

There is no hint of such a police force in the Scarman report.

There are constant references by Lord Scarman to local committees. But Scarman does not seem to be aware that those community leaders to whom he refers so often and the police liaison committees are profoundly distrusted by the rank and file of the Brixton community. It is extremely strange that while there are hints of this distrust here and there in the evidence submitted to him, Lord Scarman continues to refer to relations between the police and local committees as a firm base for progress. The Brixton populace does not share, in fact scoffs at, this naivety.

In the conclusion of his report, Lord Scarman writes as follows: "The evidence which I have received, the effect of which I have outlined in part two, leaves no doubt in my mind that racial disadvantage is a fact of British life. It was, I am equally sure, a significant factor in the causation of the British disorders." So far, so good. Urgent action is needed if it is not to become an endemic ineradicable disease threatening the very survival of our society."

One stares at these words: "ineradicable"; "threatening"; "the very survival of our society." Something is very wrong here. Either, in Lord Scarman's thoughts, the British society is very near, is at the edge of not surviving, or the Brixton insurrection represents an enormous potential.

Let me say at once that I do not under any circumstances see British society being overthrown by any number of Brixton rioters. Nevertheless some analysis has to be

made of the exceptional power which these rioters exercise.

The first generation of immigrants to Britain from the Indian sub-continent, from Africa, and most notably from the West Indies, were prepared to accept some of the jobs that the white population despised. They dreamt of accumulating some money and going home to a society which they understood and where they would occupy better positions than the ones they had left behind.

The generation of blacks born or brought up here have no pattern of social development to follow. The society in which they live offers them no firm material basis nor a social perspective. Collectively they are not aware that they have been assigned any social significance except that which they make for themselves in their limited world. That world consists of collaboration in the streets and war with all the institutions they find themselves in—above all, with the police. Yet they are mobilised by all the stimuli of an advanced society which doesn't enable them to aim at anything or go anywhere.

Fortunately for them—as everybody, including Lord Scarman, knows—there are good relations between themselves and the bulk of white society. The only normal contact they have with other social forces is with the police, and it is not surprising that all their intelligence, resentment and courage are concentrated against the police. That is why they show such extraordinary strategic, even military, acumen in their conflict with the police and police stations.

About this conflict the Chief Constable "*Freedom is beautiful, "God is love"; Cleveland Brown's perception of Speaker's Corner*

of Manchester said: "I have described it already as a form of guerrilla warfare and that's precisely what it is. They [young blacks] employed unique and extraordinary tactics and last night we had to be extremely flexible in our nature and ability to respond."

The L district of Brixton's police, which is usually manned by 710 officers, required some 7,472 during the upheaval. It is clear that the vast energy that modern society creates in young blacks is concentrated on working out ways and means to deal not with the state of their other enemies in society, but with the police.

Not black and white

Lord Scarman is terrified by this power of young blacks. If he understood the reasons for this power, he would not exaggerate and elevate their revolt into a force for the destruction of British society. That, it seems to me, is a lot of nonsense.

The distinguished judge concludes with another inexcusable blunder. It must be reproduced in full:

"I end with the quotation from President Johnson's address to the nation which appears at the very beginning of the US report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (1968):

"... The only genuine long-range solution for what has happened lies in an attack—mounted at every level—upon the conditions that breed despair and violence. All of us know what these conditions are: ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs. We should attack these conditions—not because we are frightened by conflict, but because we are fired by conscience. We should attack them because there is simply no other way to achieve a decent and orderly society in America..."

"Those words are as true of Britain today as they have been proved by subsequent events to be true of America."

They are not true of Britain in any sense. Ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, and not enough jobs, are undoubtedly at the base of the riots in Brixton and all over Britain. It is to Lord Scarman's credit that he makes that clear and understands that young blacks suffer their effects more than any other section of British society. But to say that Johnson's words are as true of Britain as they are of America is a blunder of blunders. The report that President Johnson was introducing goes on to say that America is divided into two societies, one consisting of the white people and the other of the black. No such situation exists in Great Britain.

What Lord Scarman has done in his report is to concentrate on laws and policies and ignore the sentiments of the British people. They are disturbed and bewildered by what is happening, but they are not in any way conscious that whites constitute one type of human being and blacks another in unalterable opposition to one another. If such a consciousness existed in Britain it would be obvious in Brixton. All evidence shows that it was not and is not.

