

STATE RESEARCH

**BULLETIN
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RIOT CONTROL: A NEW DIRECTION?

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**NEWS &
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THE JULY RIOTS

The tension between the police and communities in the inner cities which erupted into violence in Brixton in April (*Bulletin no 24*) came to a head in about 30 other urban areas in July. The disturbances did not follow an identical pattern. In Southall, for example, the black youth reacted angrily to police lack of protection for the community against racist

attacks by outsiders, whereas in other areas young people, both black and white, were responding to police harassment and provocation on top of the pressures of unemployment and inner city deprivation. If there was a common factor it would appear to be police attitudes and police methods. In all cases the police have behaved as a force external, hostile and beyond the control of local communities.

The 'July riots' actually began on June 20 when in Peckham in the light of what the *Daily Telegraph* described as 'a noticeable tension here since Brixton' (22.6.81) police were deployed to a number of sidestreet buses. Later that night around 500 youths attacked the police and shops after a fair. In the week before the riots, former prime minister Edward Heath, speaking to a conference in London of business people, said with some prescience that 'If you have

half a million young people hanging around on the streets all day you will have a massive increase in juvenile crime. Of course you will have racial tension when you have young blacks with less chance of getting jobs.' (*The Times*, 2.7.81) The following day, speaking on a BBC Radio 4 programme on 'Policing the 80s', Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir David McNee said that the remainder of the century would be 'a tough time for law and order'. He said: 'The greatest problem I will have in my commissionership and that my successor and probably his successor will have, is getting along with the ethnic minorities in this great city.' (2.7.81).

The riots proper began on Friday 3 July when coaches of skinheads arrived in Southall in buses decked with National Front banners and stickers. A gang of skinheads attacked the wife of the owner of an Asian shop following which large numbers of black youth came out onto the streets and besieged the Hamborough Tavern where the skinheads had come to a rock concert. Only 30 police were on the spot and by 10pm the pub had been set ablaze with petrol bombs. By 11pm there were 600 police on the streets fighting a pitched battle with black youths. One Asian, knocked unconscious by the police claimed that he was told by a police officer 'You will be another Blair Peach.' (*News of the World* 5.7.81)

Toxteth

Within hours rioting had broken out in the Toxteth area of Liverpool which was to continue over four nights and result in 160 arrests and injuries to over 250 police officers. In a pattern now becoming familiar a small incident provided the spark for the events. At 9pm a black motorcyclist was stopped by police and questioned about the ownership of his machine. A crowd gathered, the motorcyclist was handcuffed, put in a police transit van and reinforcements were summoned. The crowd began to stone the police and the arrested man jumped from the van and was taken away by the crowd. A battle ensued

between the crowd and the police with truncheons drawn. The one person arrested was Leroy Cooper, who happened to be nearest the police. He was charged with two counts of causing grievous bodily harm to police officers and actual bodily harm to another (*Daily Post* 6.7.81)

The Cooper family were already pursuing a civil action against the Merseyside Chief Constable, Kenneth Oxford, for repeated harassment of Leroy's brother Paul. Since May 1979 Paul has been arrested 14 times and asked to attend 12 identification parades - in all but three cases no action followed and of the three cases one resulted in an acquittal while two cases are pending. On Thursday 9 a case against Paul had been thrown out of court because witnesses' statements had been tampered with. A senior police officer told Paul's father in April when he was pursuing his complaints; 'You fucking niggers are all the same' (*New Statesman* 10.7.81) Such has been the experience of one family in Toxteth.

The events after the arrest then built up. On the Friday, police vehicles in Toxteth were repeatedly stoned by roaming gangs of youths until 1 am. On the Saturday, shortly after 10 pm youths stoned police cars and started setting fire to derelict buildings. By 12.30 barricades had been set up and police with riot shields were rushed in to be met with petrol bombs, bricks and chunks of concrete. By 5am buildings were still blazing and at 6am police reinforcements arrived from Greater Manchester and charged the crowd of youths. According to one youth: 'They were banging their batons on their riot shields. It was like something from the film *Zulu*' (*Sun* 6.7.81) 'Order' was restored by 7.30 am on the Sunday morning. Only three arrests had been made.

On the Sunday and through to early in Monday morning 'all hell' was to break loose in the words of one police officer. Building after building was set on fire. A black community worker explained:

'It was obvious why people went for the police, but there were exact reasons why each of those buildings was hit. The bank, for obvious reasons, the Racquets club

because the judges use it, Swainbanks furniture store because people felt he was ripping off the community . . . The Chinese chippy was left untouched but people hadn't forgotten that when the Rialto was a dance-hall it was barred to blacks . . . Now with the Racquets and the Rialto gone it's just the police' (*New Society* 16.7.81).

With 800 police in the area, including reinforcements from Cheshire, Lancashire and Greater Manchester the police totally lost control of the area and withdrew at 11pm. Milk floats were set on fire and directed at the police lines, scaffolding poles were used to charge the pockets of riot-shielded police and petrol bombs rained down. The Press Association reported at 1am that looting was widespread with not a police officer in sight. In one incident the police brought out an old fire engine and tried to hose down the rioters but the appliance was seized and itself set on fire.

At 2.15 am on Monday 6 July police fired between 25 and 30 canisters of CS gas at the crowds, the first time that CS gas had ever been used for 'public order' purposes in mainland Britain. The *New Statesman* revealed at the end of the same week that the gas was fired in complete contravention of the manufacturers' instructions. The cartridges were intended only for penetrating walls or vehicles, never for firing into crowds. (17.7.81) At least four people were seriously injured. Chief Constable Kenneth Oxford subsequently established an internal inquiry into the use of the gas - to be carried out by an officer from the Merseyside police. Later on that Monday the Home Secretary William Whitelaw said that the police were 'totally right' to use the CS gas.

In Merseyside itself the Deputy Chief Constable, Peter Wright, was unable to comprehend what was happening and exclaimed 'These people are destroying their own neighbourhood' (*New Standard* 6.7.81), while Oxford, who had previously described black Liverpudlians as 'the product of liaisons between white prostitutes and African sailors' (*New Statesman* 17.7.81) said that 'this is not a

racial issue as such. It is exclusively a crowd of black hooligans intent on making life unbearable and indulging in criminal activities.' (*Guardian* 6.7.81)

In contrast local community relations workers pointed out that they had frequently warned that 'There could be an explosion of anger by local black youths against the deprivation and prejudice that they face' and a local black journalist wrote:

'The people of Toxteth have long been dissatisfied with the type of policing they get. Some months ago a young white woman told me that she thought people living in Liverpool 8 should be paid danger money for living there, not because of crime but because of the level of police activity. At least, no one so far has suggested that the youngsters of Toxteth should be sent home. They are at home, and bitter though it may be not to find the promised land in a strange country, it is infinitely more so to be dispossessed in one's own.' (*Daily Post* 6.7.81)

By Monday 6 July as fighting continued there were over 2,000 police officers permanently on duty in Liverpool 8, drawn from a dozen forces and including 60 officers from as far away as Sussex. In parliament the mood was described in a *Guardian* editorial as 'overwhelmingly one of bafflement . . . Suddenly, forces appear to have been unleashed which nobody knows how to control' (7.7.81)

On Tuesday 7 July there were further disturbances in Toxteth and stones and petrol bombs continued to be thrown at the police. Chief Constable Oxford began to blame parents for indiscipline and the Home Secretary, following a visit to the area (when he did not leave his car) took up this approach saying 'There is a great responsibility on parents to keep their children off the streets.' (*Guardian* 8.7.81)

Rioting broke out again on 27 July after police tried to stop a car believed to be stolen. On this occasion more than 120 police in riot gear were unable to restore order for several hours. The rioting continued again on the following day and police adopted the tactics used previously in

Manchester of driving vehicles at high speeds at crowds. One youth was rammed against a wall three times by a police landrover, had his back broken and alleges that he was beaten up by police when arrested. The following day as the police 'mobile pursuit tactic' continued a disabled man was run down by a police vehicle and dragged for some thirty yards. He subsequently died. The vehicle did not stop and an inquiry into the incident was announced – to be conducted by the assistant chief constable of Northumbria. Chief Constable Oxford responding to increasing demands for his resignation supported the new method: 'Our tactics of driving towards them has proved to be effective. I would much rather use this form of dispersal than CS gas.' (*Morning Star* 30.7.81)

Manchester

After Toxteth it was Manchester which was to see the most serious fighting between the police and youths. On Wednesday 8 July several hundred youths attacked a police station and set fire to shops. Nearly all the windows of the police station were smashed and about a dozen vehicles in the station yard burned out. Despite the arrival of 400 extra police the police were unable to disperse the crowd and the police station was attacked a second time around midnight. Attack and counter-attack continued until the establishment of an 'uneasy calm' around 3 am.

As fighting continued the following day Greater Manchester Chief Constable James Anderton decided to abandon his previous 'low key' approach. In addition to bringing in the local Tactical Aid Group (the local Special Patrol Group) the police began the tactic (to be repeated elsewhere during the riots) of driving vehicles at high speeds at crowds. On the afternoon of 8 July the *Daily Telegraph* described how 'A convoy of eight police vans charged through a burning barricade on Moss Side's Park council estate . . . scattering about 100 rioters . . .' (9.7.81) The *Daily Mirror* described the scene on the Thursday night:

'24 police wagons each manned by 10 steel-helmeted riot police roared around the shopping and housing area pinning black and white youths to walls and arresting them. Several youths were knocked to the grounds by the wagons . . . The rioters moved on to take up positions in high rise flats and flyovers to hurl down rocks on the wagons. Later snatch squads of police moved out into the flats. Youths – black and white – were kicked to the ground before being taken away.' (10.7.81)

This technique of criss crossing an area with vans driven at high speed with officers leaning out of rear doors ready to leap out was one which had been learned from the experience of Northern Ireland, leading the *Guardian* to report that the scene was 'already bristling with a police presence that was more reminiscent of Northern Ireland than mainland Britain has yet seen.' (10.7.81)

The injuries inflicted on members of the public were describe by one local doctor as 'terrifying' (*The Times* 22.7.81) and while Chief Constable Anderton said he would look into any complaints the Greater Manchester Council announced that it would set up its own investigation into police activities.

The rest of the country

Elsewhere disturbances were reported over the weekend of the 10-12 July in 12 areas of London, Preston, Hull, Wolverhampton, Reading, Birmingham, Luton, Chester, Leicester, Leeds and Huddersfield. According to the *Daily Star* police made 2,500 arrests during the previous ten days, more than half of them over the one weekend (13.7.81).

In Brixton rioting broke out again on 10 July only hours after Lord Scarman had completed the first phase of his enquiry into the April riots. As in other instances the events began with police attempting to arrest a black man. Two police cars were burned and a *Guardian* journalist witnessing the SPG beating up two young black girls was told by a police sergeant that

'anything goes' (13.7.81). Five days later further rioting broke out after 100 police officers, led by local divisional commander Brian Fairbairn, raided homes and business premises in search of petrol bombs after a 'tip off'. (One report said the search was to retrieve an unauthorised firearm taken from a police officer during a previous raid. (Not . . . 24.7.81)) None were found but the damage caused by the police was extensive and was described by Lord Scarman as 'very serious indeed', including windows smashed, doors broken down, and floorboards ripped up. Scotland Yard tried to minimise the raid saying that since April there had been 70 such raids in the Brixton area (*New Standard* 20.7.81). Although the Home Secretary ordered senior civil servants to visit the damaged premises and report immediately, the response of the Metropolitan Police was to appoint Deputy Assistant Commissioner Geoffrey Dear to make an internal enquiry.

Government and police responses

From the government and the police, reactions to the riots were those of advocating resort to greater repression, either in the form of the law or police weaponry. After the earliest disturbances Eldon Griffiths MP, parliamentary adviser to the Police Federation, was given nearly a full page in the *Daily Express* to argue that:

'The time has come . . . to set up specially trained squads of men with all the support of helmets, fireproof uniforms, armoured cars - yes, and even guns if necessary . . .'

The police, said Griffiths, should be trained by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and he identified 'three priorities' for policing - better protection, anti-riot weapons and stronger powers (6.7.81). The chairman of the Police Federation, Jim Jardine, called for more money to recruit more police. Griffiths' demands were to be conceded with considerable speed.

The cabinet, meeting on 9 July in emergency session, discussed the need for a new Riot Act giving the police the power to clear the streets and concluded that the

main objections were 'technical and legal' and on 13 July the Home Secretary told a meeting of Conservative back bench MPs that the government would make available army camps to hold those convicted of offences during the riots. He said that CS gas and plastic bullets were available to the police and that new protective helmets and other clothing and armoured vehicles would be provided. In addition he referred to tests with water cannon. The following day in parliament the Prime Minister said that the government would agree to the use of water cannon, CS gas and plastic bullets if chief constables wanted them. The same day the army demonstrated water cannon and armoured vehicles to senior police officers at military research establishments at Chobham in Surrey and near Derby and offered armoured carriers, riot helmets, riot sticks and training in unarmed combat. In addition six British police officers, including Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Jock Wilson, arrived in Northern Ireland to discuss riot control with the RUC.

Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir David McNee dismissed the idea of a formal 'third force' for riot control or the use of plastic bullets but only 'in the immediate future'. Instead he called for a 'mini' Riot Act, a simple streamlined measure which would enable police officers to disperse crowds 'with the threat that if they did not do so within a short period, they would place themselves in great difficulty' (*New Standard* 20.7.81). The idea of a separate third force was also dismissed by counter-insurgency theorist Major General Richard Clutterbuck who canvassed instead the wider use of police video cameras and computer intelligence, a 'substantial' Special Patrol Group in every city, greater use of Police Support Units between forces and more standby vehicles (*Daily Telegraph* 10.7.81).

The response to the measures being put forward among other chief constables was not unanimous. The Chief Constable of West Yorkshire, Ronald Gregory, said that he did not want water cannon, and a

deputation of chief constables told the Home Secretary on 15 July of their doubts about the use of riot weapons. The President of the Association of Chief Police Officers, George Terry, said after the meeting that chief constables were not uneasy about deploying the weapons but fully realised their dangers. They were worried, he said, that traditional methods of policing would be changed by the introduction of such hardware (*Guardian* 16.7.81).

Most outspoken, however, was John Alderson, chief constable of Devon and Cornwall, who in an interview with the *Sunday Telegraph* said that 'There has to be a better way than blind repression . . . rioting is not a new phenomenon . . . We must tackle the underlying tensions and develop unorthodox, imaginative and radical solutions . . . We are at a critical watershed. We must not advance the police response too far ahead of the situation. It is even worth a few million pounds of destruction rather than get pushed too far down that road. That will only bring further violence.' (12.7.81).

A WATERSHED IN BRITISH POLICING

By the summer of each year all the Chief Constables in the United Kingdom have published their reports for the previous year. So too have the Chief Inspector of Constabulary for England and Wales and the Chief Inspector of Constabulary for Scotland. In the light of events covered elsewhere in this Bulletin, this year's reports make bizarre reading.

It is most illuminating to start with the overall picture for England and Wales presented in the Chief Inspector of Constabulary's Report completed on June 15.

In 1980 the number of police officers in England and Wales reached an all-time high of 117,423. With few other professions expanding and big police pay increases under the Tories, all but three of the 43

forces in England and Wales exceeded their 'authorised establishment' (the numbers they are allowed to recruit). Merseyside, for example, had 238 more officers than authorised, and the West Midlands 131. During the 1970s the number of police officers in the 42 forces covered by the Report (which excludes the Metropolitan Police) increased by over 25%. In 1971, while their authorised establishment was 83,035, the actual number of officers was 74,350; in 1980 the figures were 92,353 and 92,310, respectively.

The same decade also saw a large rise in the number of civilian staff employed by the police - from 16,417 in 1971 to 21,173 in 1980). The 1970s was, in addition, the period when the police service employed technological aids to an ever increasing extent, ranging from vast record-keeping computers, like the Police National Computer at Hendon, to local 'command and control' systems to ensure the most efficient deployment of personnel on the streets.

Over the same period the Special Branch was massively expanded, Special Patrol Groups were created as paramilitary units in over half the forces in the country, Police Support Units were created to provide swift 'mutual aid' aid to other forces, and riot control became a standard part of police training (see *Bulletin* no 19).

'I am entirely confident'

Mr James Crane, Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Constabulary, writes in his annual report that despite the St Pauls 'riot' in Bristol in April 1980 and the 'riots' in Brixton in April this year:

'Personally I am entirely confident of the will of the British Police to foster, and wherever possible improve, relations with its public of whatever colour, creed or social position, at the same time as fulfilling its duty to preserve order with similar disregard for race and without fear or favour' (dated June 15, published July 23. House of Commons Paper 409)

In the 'aftermath of Bristol' the police needed, he writes, not only to review its