

# ...our riots

by Rushanara Ali

*Five years ago, the northern riots exposed Britain's racial divides. Have things improved?*

---

*Rushanara Ali worked in the home office communities directorate, 2002-5*

---

Five years ago this summer, Britain had its worst riots for a generation. Bradford, Burnley and Oldham went through their own versions of the disturbances that spread across France last year, with the full panoply of burning cars and broken windows, confrontations between white and Asian youth, charging riot police and makeshift barricades.

The immediate official response was harsh--256 people were charged in Bradford alone. Almost all pleaded guilty and dozens of mainly Asian young people were given unusually stiff sentences--an average of over four years for the adults, a year and a half for the juveniles, far more than in previous incidents. (And despite the fact that many Pakistani parents, particularly in Bradford, had put pressure on their sons to give themselves up.)

But the subsequent response was more reflective. After the Brixton and Toxteth riots in 1981, Britain went through a bout of soul-searching. Lord Scarman's inquiry prompted a review of policing and other policies, and Michael Heseltine's famous cabinet paper, "It Took a Riot," made the case for a more activist government inner-city strategy. Twenty years later the machinery of official inquiry moved into action once again, under the former Labour minister John Denham. The local authorities commissioned a succession of official reports which sought to explain what had led to the disturbances. Ted Cantele, the former chief executive of Nottingham city council, was given the most important task: David Blunkett, then home secretary, asked him to draw on all the other reports and explain what had caused such deep polarisation, what could be done about it and the lessons for national policy and practice.

Where Scarman had examined the explosive mix of unemployment and exclusion on the one hand and police prejudice on the other, Cantele painted a more complex picture of the mutual misunderstandings and resentments which had made these towns so combustible. He warned that well-intentioned policies in schools and regeneration could have malign consequences as communities dug in against each other. Central government regeneration programmes had fuelled competition for funding by requiring neighbourhoods to bid against each other, thus generating mistrust by appearing to favour one community--white-dominated or Asian-dominated--over another. Housing and school admissions policies had reinforced divisions, as Asian and white parents sent their children to predominantly Asian and white schools respectively. Cantele's report looked at the insights from "contact theory"--showing that when communities ceased interacting in everyday life, misunderstandings and resentments followed.

I was drawn into these discussions as part of a government unit that had been established in 2002 to strengthen community cohesion. I was brought up in the Bangladeshi community of Tower Hamlets in east London and had seen how resentment could turn into waves of racist attacks against Asians. But I'd also seen how the careful hard work of many people during the 1990s had helped the community to cohere remarkably successfully.

At first glance, many of the most troubled places in northwest England do not look like obvious breeding grounds for unrest. Their mannered Victorian façades are far more attractive than the worst estates of Chicago and Detroit, the French banlieues or even parts of the northeast and London. Bradford is full of impressive civic architecture. The centre of Burnley is made up of neat Victorian terraced houses. Oldham too has spacious residential suburbs, extensive parks and an attractive city centre.

But the problems soon become all too clear. During my first visit to Burnley in April 2002, I remember seeing rows of empty homes with two or three "for sale" boards alongside election posters for the BNP. The average house price in many areas had fallen below £10,000, giving the people still there little chance of moving out. The half-empty streets then attracted squatters, addicts and petty criminals, making life miserable for those left behind. Not surprisingly, when they saw money pouring into neighbouring areas they felt victimised and forgotten.

A century ago, east Lancashire was at the heart of Britain's ascendancy as an industrial power, exporting cotton to the world. But the industry was already a ghost of its former self in the 1960s when it attracted workers from Pakistan. Then, during the 1980s and 1990s, the jobs disappeared, and whole communities, Asian and white, found themselves economically marooned.

Despite this unpromising backdrop, many of the steps taken since 2001 have been broadly successful. The painstaking work of rebuilding trust between communities has started to pay off. Local public services work more closely with the police to respond quickly to incidents. Much more effort has gone into managing rumours and misinformation, by working closely with local media and those with influence over young people. Ordinary people are taking on the responsibility of helping to diffuse potential conflict through their everyday encounters. I saw examples of this in Burnley, where the police were forging links with taxi drivers and young white and Pakistani youth workers. More recently, during a visit to Oldham, I saw the local mosque encouraging community leaders to calm nerves among young Muslims when they heard that the BNP was likely to exploit the Danish cartoons controversy to stir up hostility in the area.

There are some exemplary bridge-building projects--like the Prince's Trust mentoring project in Burnley or Peacemakers in Oldham--which work with young whites and Asians. Many of the councils have sharpened up their act--and are certainly more impressive than those portrayed in David Edgar's recent drama *Playing with Fire*.

But despite these relative successes, underlying tension remains. The big story is the continuing growth of the BNP and its potential, so far unrealised, to become a significant political player. As a teenager in early-1990s east London, I had seen the ugly mood that prevailed when far right politics combined with tensions between communities. I saw it again on local election

night in 2002 when Burnley was full of police and huddled groups of watching media. That year the BNP won three council seats in Burnley and 28 per cent of the vote, its first breakthrough since Derek Beackon's 1993 by-election victory in Tower Hamlets. Beackon's win prompted a national response and an effective local campaign that led to his ejection the following year. But in 2002 the main parties seemed complacent and distracted; their local machines were weaker than before, with neither the funds nor activists to mount much opposition. But BNP operations are growing steadily. In 1992's local elections the party put up just 13 candidates; in 2004 they put up 309. It now has 20 councillors in office.

Moreover, the BNP is trying, with some success, to go mainstream. Nick Griffin, the leader, is a much more plausible politician than his predecessors and he has helped the party gain a substantial foothold in electoral politics. In 2004, the party won over 800,000 votes in the European elections and 90,000 votes in the GLA elections. It won 192,750 votes in the 2005 general election, including 16.9 per cent of the vote in Barking. Polling evidence from the 2004 London elections study shows that over 25 per cent of Londoners either have voted or would consider voting for the BNP.

Like other far right parties across Europe, the BNP is becoming a more sophisticated campaigning force. It is no longer just interested in race and migration, and now has something to say on almost all local issues. The party is expected to field a record number of candidates in this year's local elections, with a target list of 45 seats. It will campaign heavily on anti-Muslim sentiments, branding the election a referendum on Muslims.

It is wrong to claim that segregation is growing everywhere--cities like London are becoming less segregated over time. But there is no doubt that in some places communities have pulled apart, in schools as well as housing, and are staying apart. Conflict does not stem solely from segregation, or multiculturalism, or any of the other single cause explanations that have become popular in recent years. Very diverse communities can and do manage to live relatively harmoniously. What Cantle and others showed was that conflict rarely happens unless there are underlying conditions such as unemployment, alienation and mistrust, and competition between communities. But even then these combustible materials only catch fire when there is an arsonist with an interest in seeing them burn. Now, for the first time in living memory, we have such a political arsonist at large.

[...our riots](#)

[http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article\\_details.php?id=7408](http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk/article_details.php?id=7408)

[Prospect Magazine](#)

<http://www.prospect-magazine.co.uk>