

The Oldham Riots

Discrimination, Deprivation and Communal Tension in the United Kingdom

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Britain's worst race riots for years erupted in the northern town of Oldham in Lancashire over the weekend of the 25th May 2001. Young men from a distressed ethnic community hurled petrol bombs, torched cars, and shattered windows, clashing violently with riot police. The riots have revealed the extent of antagonism and polarisation between ethnic minority and white communities in the town, and indeed across the United Kingdom. In particular, they highlight the grave level of discontent felt within the ethnic minority Muslim community. The Oldham riots are a manifestation of deep and long-standing social problems related to racism and deprivation within communities of all ethnic backgrounds, which must be tackled if similar catastrophes are not to occur again.

The case of Oldham is also not isolated. Similar cases of communal tension and antagonism along ethnic and religious lines exist throughout the UK, including many previous examples. In the 1990s, similar outbreaks of discontent occurred in the deprived areas of Oxford, Leeds and Cardiff; a decade earlier, in Brixton, Southall and Toxteth. The matrix of causes in all of these previous cases were poverty, ethnic and religious tensions, and a distrusted local police force.¹ To forestall the aggravation of such tensions into local conflagrations of the sort that occurred most recently in Oldham and Burnley in June 2001, a balanced understanding of the causes of the riots is essential.

The Islamic Human Rights Commission has prepared this preliminary report with a view to identifying particularly but not solely the perceptions of the youth of the Muslim community. As a preliminary report into the causes of the disturbances, IHRC has noted the necessity of identifying the perceived grievances of this particular group who were involved in various ways in the disturbances and events surrounding them. Any attempt at reconciliation between the communities at conflict in these

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areas, be they: racial i.e. white, Asian; religious e.g. non-Muslim and Muslim; institutional e.g. police, local authority; can only be effective if the voices of all those involved are represented. Any attempt to enforce the terms of reconciliation onto the local communities will lack ethical validity if all voices have not been considered, and each view discussed.

Based on interviews with locals in Oldham, this report seeks to give voice to a particularly alienated group i.e. the Muslim youth, and to assess how far their perceptions are well founded or misplaced.

The perceptions can be broken down into five broad categories:

- (1) The Muslim youth face complete alienation from social and political processes due to deprivation and discrimination.
- (2) The local police have persistently pursued highly discriminatory policies against the ethnic and religious minorities of Oldham.
- (3) Various institutions including the police and the media provoked the disturbances through highly insensitive and inherently discriminatory practice in May 2001.
- (4) The far-right has developed and exploited Islamophobic sentiment.
- (5) Muslim youth concerns have been deliberately excluded by various authorities, from all relevant discussions about local problems both historically and in the wake of the disturbances.

There is a further perception within the Muslim youth community that since the disturbances any number of delegations and ‘fact-finding missions’ have been parachuted in to investigate and make recommendations on the basis of what are felt to be very superficial visits. IHRC has tried to avoid this approach by making use of community sources, and expert analysis. It also acknowledges that whilst there are national problems, trends and patterns discernable in the current crises, the local context should not be ignored and needs specialized and concerted action. In particular one of the main grass roots problem is that the youth feel they have been ignored and alienated by those who claim to be representing their interests within the community, and those who are supposed to be addressing their interests from outside. National organisation should not become another party that usurps their voice at the expense of proper and direct representation.

I. The Alienation of Muslim Youth: The Context of Discrimination and Deprivation

There is no doubt that the Oldham riots were the culmination of a wider ongoing set of social problems within the town that have not been adequately addressed by the Government. Principal among these problems is the fact that many areas in the Oldham community suffer unalleviated poverty and deprivation, which has led to the escalation of frustration with what is seen to be injustice and/or indifference on behalf of the current local authority. These problems, which have long-term and short-term dimensions, have been responsible for the exacerbation of communal tensions within Oldham along ethnic and religious lines. Unless these problems and their nature are investigated, no adequate and balanced understanding of the roots of the Oldham riots can be attained.

The ethnic minority communities in Oldham are made up primarily of people of Bengali, Kashmiri and Pakistani background. While these communities are tight-knitted among their own ethnic group, they nevertheless possess a cross-ethnic bond through their common religious heritage in the form of the Islamic faith. This Muslim Asian community suffers from a great deal from deprivation and poverty. Such deprivation is not exclusive to the Muslim community, and indeed affects the white community in a similar manner. Poverty affects communities of all backgrounds in Oldham. As has been the case with every other recent British riot, the eruption occurred in an area suffering from desperate economic hardship - and observers agree that both the white and ethnic minority communities suffer from poverty and deprivation. Oldham is the 38th most deprived district in England.² Nearly one-fifth (18 per cent) of the population - a total of nearly 40,000 people - live in households dependent upon Income Support. A further one-tenth have incomes which are low enough to qualify for means tested Housing Benefit or Council Tax Benefit.³ Statistics show that the town is almost uniquely polarised between rich and poor. Two wards, Saddleworth East and West, are among the least deprived 10 per cent nationally. Yet five wards, Coldhurst, St Mary's, Werneth, Alexandra, and St. James, are among the worst 10 per cent. The scale of poverty and deprivation within the western half of Oldham is therefore particularly intense. Unemployment and low pay are the two fundamental causes of such high levels of poverty. Indeed, "Oldham has always been a low wage economy", such that even those who are employed are "often on low incomes." One April 1997 study of jobs on offer in Oldham Job Centre concluded that "the average advertised rate of pay was £3.77 per hour" and further that "two-thirds of jobs paid less than £3.97 per hour."⁴

The Oldham Borough Council reports that available evidence indicates the existence of "a structural unemployment problem" in the town. In 1998 "around 4,500 people in Oldham (4.3% of the workforce) were unemployed." An estimated "20% of these had been out of work for more than one year", while "rates of unemployment are particularly high among younger and older workers".⁵ Indeed, the unemployment rate for youth in general is around 40%.⁶ The application of methodology developed by Sheffield Hallam University, however, indicates that unemployment is significantly higher than official estimates based merely on claimants. It is therefore believed that "the claimant count underestimates Oldham's unemployment by nearly four times (17,800). When similar measures are applied nationally this shows a rate of joblessness higher than the national average." Not only then, does Oldham suffer from extraordinary conditions of deprivation compared to the rest of the UK, the predominantly Muslim ethnic minority community of Oldham is even more deprived. The jobless rate for whites is at 4 per cent, for Pakistanis 16 per cent, and for Bangladeshis 25 per cent, rising to an estimated 40 per cent for young Asian males.⁷ According to Oldham Borough Council, "at 38%, the unemployment rate for people of Pakistani and Bangladeshi ethnic origin is nearly five times that of white people". Oldham Council locates the principal cause of this structural problem in the town's "economic history". The town has a large proportion of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, while rapid changes in the local economy have left many workers with redundant skills. Unemployed people are also particularly likely to have no academic or vocational qualifications. The Council observes that: "Large numbers of people - disproportionately older people, and particularly people from our ethnic minority communities - are potentially facing near permanent exclusion from the labour market."⁸ In fact, the Council itself bears direct responsibility for the excessive unemployment of ethnic minorities in the community. In the year 2000 only 1.7 per

cent of its employees were Asian, representing some 178 people out of a total workforce of 10,500. These figures are even more significant in light of the fact that Oldham's Asians account for around, 27,500, or one-eighth, of its 220,000 citizens.⁹

Oldham also suffers from poor housing conditions. Problems of unfitness and disrepair are widespread within many ageing properties. Thirteen per cent of Oldham's housing stock is "statutorily unfit for human habitation and a further 28% are in serious disrepair". Houses in poor condition can primarily be found within central Oldham in areas such as Glodwick, Westwood, Coppice, Freehold, and Clarksfield. According to Oldham Council, the principal victims of these poor conditions are the predominantly Muslim Asian community: "The Pakistani and Bangladeshi community live in these areas". Dire property conditions are compounded by the high rates of household overcrowding. As a result, in these communities, "the low income of many households prevents them from carrying out necessary repairs or improvements to their homes, or from moving into larger accommodation which is better suited to their needs."¹⁰

That ethnic minorities in Oldham bear the brunt of social problems is thus a documented fact. The predominantly Muslim Asian community of Oldham suffers disproportionately, and thus parts of the community justifiably feel that they are unfairly deprived, especially the younger generation.¹¹ Indeed, there can be little doubt that the comparatively worse conditions faced by ethnic minorities is due, on some significant level, to institutional racism. The Trades Union Congress (TUC), for instance, warned at the end of April 2001 that "institutional racism is responsible for unemployment rates among blacks and Asians that are twice as high as among whites" within the UK at large.¹² In this context, the fundamentally discriminatory causes of disproportionate deprivation experienced by ethnic communities in Oldham can be deduced, particularly in relation to the higher unemployment rate among the Pakistani and Bengali community - a figure which ultimately shows that although both the white and Muslim Asian communities are deprived, the latter are five times worse off than the former.

This sort of severe impoverishment and deprivation has therefore affected communities of all ethnic backgrounds in Oldham, but has particularly devastated the lives of ethnic minorities. According to the Campaign Against Racism and Fascism (CARF) this state of affairs is rooted in "a whole history of racism and social exclusion." CARF reports that in 1993, Oldham Borough Council was found to have been operating "an unlawful segregation policy in its housing allocation". The policy effectively "ghettoised Asians onto a rundown estate, while whites were given homes in a more desirable area."¹³ The legacy of this policy, which has gone on for decades, has continued to this day, exacerbating an informal type of apartheid between the white and Asian communities.¹⁴ In 1990, Oldham Council attempted to cover-up a council housing allocation report it had commissioned which exposed a "staggering catalogue of discrimination." The report found that Asians "spent longer on waiting lists, were more likely to be offered lower quality housing, and were segregated on specific estates around the town centre." A Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) investigation into private housing conducted in the same year similarly revealed that at least two estate agents were "redlining the practice of confining different racial groups to their own areas."¹⁵ Other problems include the fact that the Council has no race relations or quality officer; similarly, the local racial equality council was shut down two years ago.¹⁶

This combination of council policies along with deprivation as a consequence of institutional racism, has culminated in increasing mistrust and misunderstanding between some members of these communities, which in itself has made it easier for communal tensions to be aggravated along ethnic and religious lines. The somewhat accurate perception among the generally deprived Muslim Asian community of discrimination has led to widespread resentment against a status quo which seems to favour the white community.

These sentiments have been exacerbated by the way in which resources are allocated in the town. Single Regeneration Budgets (SRB) have purportedly allocated huge sums of money into Asian areas which are suffering the most from poverty and deprivation, and therefore are most in need of resources. However, as a local community leader – who is also a local government Community Language Officer – comments, while the local press widely publicises the input of resources into predominantly Muslim Asian areas, such as Glodwick, in actual practice the infrastructural influx of money has mostly benefited members of the white community, particularly the town centre. In one specific case, around £5.6 million was allocated to Glodwick, while the majority of the SRB aid package was spent on white areas. In effect only around 10-15 per cent was spent on regeneration and development in Glodwick. On the contrary, when resources are officially allocated to predominantly white areas, this influx of money does not make the headlines. This disparity in coverage manufactures widespread misunderstanding of the clearly selective allocation of resources. Members of deprived white areas are consequently vulnerable to feeling that Muslim Asian communities are being favoured by the policies of the local authority, particularly as a result of slanted press coverage (see also Chapter III).¹⁷

In all, the past two decades in Oldham has seen the reception of £400 million for regeneration and renewal, with another £120 million planned. Despite the funds being ostensibly directed at deprived urban areas, in effect its impact has been negligible in terms of closing social and economic divisions. Due to the racially exclusive segregation that has resulted from the policies discussed above, the input of resources into predominantly Muslim Asian areas of inner Oldham such as Glodwick and Westwood is seen by many deprived whites as racial favouritism. This is despite the fact that some of the most deprived areas in the UK are within inner Oldham, and indeed meet central government and European Union funding criteria. In some sense, therefore, this ultimately constitutes pinpointing the even more deprived Asian community as a scapegoat for their own deprivation. Asian communities also remain acutely cognisant of their continuing deprivation and impoverishment in contrast with the development of other white areas, despite the purported input of resources in their areas by the council.¹⁸ While sentiments on both sides are understandable, it is therefore necessary to reject claims that Muslim Asian communities are racially favoured by local government policies within the status quo.

It is, however, clear that the above-mentioned socio-economic conditions of mutual deprivation experienced by communities of all ethnic backgrounds in Oldham – but from which the Muslim Asian communities suffer on a greater scale – combined with its disintegrative effects on the increasingly frustrated youth, has engineered an environment which is unstable, and vulnerable to provocation.

II. Police Discrimination and the Development of Defensive Self-Reliance within the Muslim Youth Community

Institutional discrimination against the predominantly Muslim Asian community has been accompanied by what appears to amount to severe levels of police racism. Since the release of the seminal study of police discrimination, *The MacPherson Report*, it is hardly any longer in doubt that the British police service suffers from institutional racism. *The MacPherson Report* found that racial violence was endemic, the police were part of the problem of racism, and ethnic minorities were routine victims of miscarriages of justice. The root cause, the report found, is a deeply embedded “canteen culture” of racism within the police force, not only within the Metropolitan Police Service, but throughout the UK. The inquiry concluded that “institutional racism... exists both in the Metropolitan Police Service and in other Police Services and other institutions countrywide.”¹⁹ As observed by *The Guardian* correspondent Vikram Dodd who covered the Stephen Lawrence inquiry, the fundamental finding of the report is “namely that police prejudice against black people was so ingrained that it contributed to allowing racist murderers to get away with their crime.” So “seismic” are the report’s well documented conclusions that, as Dodd comments, there now remains no good reason for anyone to deny the massive and systematic level of police racism throughout the country: “For years black and Asian people had been saying they received a second-rate service from the police, that they were over-policed as suspects and under-policed as victims... After the MacPherson report, there is no excuse for anyone claiming they are ignorant of the discrimination at the heart of the criminal justice system, no excuse for the culture of disbelief that greeted the experiences of black and Asian Britons who found they were repeatedly being let down by the people from whom they needed help most.”²⁰

In Oldham, endless reports from members of the ethnic minority communities point to a long record of police discrimination against Asians in the town, as a consequence of the form of institutional racism documented by the Chairman of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, Sir William MacPherson of Cluny. *The Guardian*, for example, reports that: “In Oldham a very specific antagonism has arisen. The local chief superintendent, Eric Hewitt, is regarded with deep suspicion by a chunk of the community he is meant to serve and protect. Their first complaint is that the police simply do not come to their aid when they are in trouble. Every street corner has a story to tell of a call for help which went unaided, a racist attack that went unhalted.”²¹ Policing Adviser to the Mayor of London, Lee Jasper, who in his own words “spent some years growing up in Oldham,” has similarly highlighted the massive scale of police racism in the town. Describing the long and, indeed, dire record, Jasper reports: “Policing was a joke. Random stops and searches were frequent. Young black people were arrested and charged in their thousands. You expected to be beaten up and if you were not, this was grounds for suspicion that you had exchanged information for freedom. Police racism was cruel, violent and unremitting.” This state of affairs, he observes, continues to this day against members of the Asian community such as Bengalis. “The Bangladeshi community in Oldham is following the path trod by the Caribbean community 20 years earlier”, he notes. “I see lots of echoes of our own experience. Undoubtedly they have had to fight to protect themselves from vicious racial attacks without any protection from the police. Those estates still exist where Bangladeshis cannot walk without fear.”²²

The Campaign Against Racism and Fascism further refers to a clear record of police discrimination against the predominantly Muslim Asian community. “The Q Division of Greater Manchester Police, which operates in Oldham,” reports CARF, “has a history of indifference to racial attacks by whites in the area and Asian youths are themselves regularly harassed by the police (recently a young Asian boy was seriously wounded when, having already surrendered to the police, he was mauled by police dogs).”²³ This combination of police harassment of Asians and police indifference to racist attacks on Asians has been the principal cause of suspicion and resentment towards the police force among young members of Oldham’s Asian community. CARF cites a representative example in the case of Gulfranz Nazir:

For four years, Gulfranz Nazir’s family in Limeside, Oldham was subjected to racial harassment by gangs of up to thirty racist youths armed with crowbars and hammers, who tried to attack their shop. Whenever the police were called they failed to turn up in time to make a difference. Finally Gulfranz organised with friends to defend his family from the gangs. The result was a running battle on the streets between armed white youths and Asians.

In tandem with police indifference to racist attacks by whites in the area along with police harassment of Asian youth, ethnic minority communities in the town have grown increasingly disillusioned with the police – and this has effectively cultivated the formation of gangs of Asian youth who are no longer willing to tolerate such phenomena. “Consequently, there is little faith in the police’s ability to tackle white racist gangs”, reports CARF. “Gulfranz Nazir is not alone in feeling the time has come to organise self-defence.”²⁴

There are many examples of police racism similar to what was experienced by Gulfranz Nazir. On Sunday the 28th May 2001 at around 11:30 AM, a local government officer from Yorkshire, also an Oldham community leader, was visiting the area of Glodwick. He reports that he saw seven Asian youths of around 10-13 years standing around a policewoman. One of the boys was complaining to the policewoman about the racist remark of one of her colleagues, addressing him with the phrase: “You black bastard.” The policewoman replied by acknowledging: “That’s very rude”, to which the boy responded incredulously: “Is that all you have to say? If I call one of you lot a ‘white bastard’ I’d get arrested, but if one of you lot are racist, nothing happens to him!” The community leader observes that: “Almost every night, Asian taxi drivers are beaten up, racially abused and attacked. They don’t report because they know the police will do nothing.”²⁵ As Jenny Wardleworth of Oldham United Against Racism rightly asks: “How many really nasty attacks on taxi drivers get just two lines in the [Oldham Evening] Chronicle?”

Another case that occurred the following day on the testimony of a resident of Coppice illustrates the extent of police racism in Oldham even more clearly. At around 2 AM on Monday 29th May, one male member of the Asian community in Coppice, who will be called Khalid here, reportedly awoke to disturbing noises in his street. Fearing for the safety of his wife and children, he undertook a brief excursion out of his home to investigate the cause of the sounds. Outside he found five or six police officers in riot gear outside a police van. Upon seeing him one of the officers immediately approached him and asked him: “What are you doing here?” The civilian replied by explaining that he lived in Coppice with his family. The policeman then reportedly grabbed him roughly and said: “What do you think you’re doing here Paki?” After being released by the officer, Khalid angrily asked him what his call number was, to which the officer sarcastically responded: “My call number is 999.”

Khalid then stated that he would go the police van “to see the van number”, and began approaching the van. The police officer then grabbed Khalid and threw him on to the ground, shoving him facedown and repeating further defamatory racist remarks. During this assault the other officers near the police van were laughing and joking at the actions of their colleague.²⁶ These sorts of reports are endemic in Oldham. Labour MP for Oldham West Michael Meacher heard them himself firsthand when he met with members of Oldham’s mainly Muslim Asian community, mostly youth, at Coppice Community Centre a few days prior to the UK General Elections.

As the London Mayor’s Policing Adviser Lee Jasper comments on the history of discrimination and deprivation in Oldham, “Education, employment and policing policies were imbued with a crude racism that would have been considered intolerable elsewhere... A community was devastated by racism, destroyed by lack of opportunity and left to rot in the twilight zone of the urban underclass.” The consequence today is that, under the pressures of social exclusion, lack of opportunities, institutional racism, racial violence, police indifference and police harassment, the younger members of the Asian “urban underclass” are no longer willing to tolerate their continuing state of repression and marginalisation.

It ought to be no surprise that communities suffering such extreme economic marginalisation and social segregation should seek to defend themselves. There is a historical failure of the town to challenge its own institutional racism. Islands of exclusion imprison within them boundless talent and creativity, confined by sheer walls of discrimination and lack of opportunity. People will inevitably cleave tightly to the central tenets of their culture and faith. Occasionally when provoked they will react like a cornered tiger.²⁷

It is in this context that it is possible to properly consider the implications of police figures that apparently prove that the majority of victims of racially-motivated attacks are whites, rather than Asians. In 1998, Chief Superintendent of the Oldham division of Greater Manchester Police, Eric Hewitt, released figures showing that out of 250 incidents in one year, most involved attacks on whites by Pakistanis. Hewitt then used these figures to prove that Oldham’s real problem was crimes committed by Asian gangs, as opposed to racial attacks by whites on Asians. In an article in the *Lancashire Evening Chronicle*, Eric Hewitt argued: “There is evidence that they are trying to create exclusive areas for themselves. Anyone seems to be a target if they are white. It is a growing polarisation between some sections of the Asian youth and white youth on the grounds of race, manifesting itself in violence, predominantly Asian.” Hewitt later repeated the exercise when he released police figures in January 2001 showing that 62 per cent of racially-motivated attacks last year in Oldham were perpetrated by Asians against whites. A special report prepared for Greater Manchester’s Chief Constable David Wilmot concurred that: “The majority of violent racist incidents are perpetrated by Asians on whites, which is an ongoing trend involving primarily Pakistani and Bangladeshi teenagers.”²⁸

But how reliable are crime figures produced by the police? There are several very powerful reasons to severely doubt the accuracy of police figures in this respect. First of all, the statistics from which crime figures are derived are confidential. This means that it is impossible to independently assess and verify their interpretation. In other words, because police crime figures are based on internally conducted unpublished studies, their accuracy is simply independently unverifiable. This point is damning in consideration of other overbearing factors, particularly the findings of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry documented in *The MacPherson Report*, that the police service

throughout the UK suffers from institutional racism. MacPherson recognised that this racism has a definite effect on police recording and categorisation of crime, and accordingly forwarded several recommendations to solve the skewing of crime figures due to police misdemeanours. *The Observer* highlighted the essence of the problem as follows:

For most members of ethnic minority groups racism is about verbal harassment and intimidation, petty attacks that build up over time, an air of menace that kills the spirit while leaving the body intact. The problem is that, for years, it has been impossible to get a true picture of that kind of racist crime. Victims, convinced the authorities didn't give a damn, would fail to report what had happened to them.²⁹

Indeed, racially-motivated crime far outweighs the actual reporting of it, by thirteen times. The fundamental problem is the police response to the reporting of racial incidents. Third party agencies – ethnic organisations who take reports from race attack survivors and pass them onto the police to make it easier to complain - have most often come across police officers who have responded in a less than helpful manner, including behaviour such as the refusal to record crimes as racially-motivated; the refusal to record crimes as racially-motivated despite clear racial motive unless prompted to do so; suggesting to ethnic victims of racially-motivated attacks that complaining is futile unless evidence is garnered by the complainant.³⁰ In Oldham this is a genuine problem that, combined with intense distrust of a police force that is clearly institutionally racist, has led to the systematic under-reporting of racially-motivated crimes committed against the Asian community. As noted by CARF, an Asian victim of a racist attack in Oldham is thus highly unlikely to report the crime to the police - and even if the crime is reported, it may not, and probably will not, be logged as a racial attack. On the contrary, an attack by an Asian gang on whites remains most likely to be reported and recorded by the police as a racial incident. “It is easy to see how this situation would result in misleading police figures for racial incidents which would suggest that whites were the main victims of racially motivated crime.”³¹

Another key factor pointing to the racist nature of police crime figures, is the deliberate manipulation of statistics for propagandistic purposes. The findings of recent investigations into the Nottinghamshire police service indicate that the logging of crime figures is “routinely skewed by forces to control how their daily operations are presented to the outside world.” A number of crucial revelations in relation to “particular malpractices” concerning the introduction of performance targets for police forces during the 1990s, prove that:

... police paperwork can be massaged to give whatever impression is needed and therefore crime figures become less an accurate measure of real crime and more an instrument of public relations. When a major element of police public relations has to do with defusing claims about racism, we should not be surprised to find that police figures are also skewed with regard to race.³²

These facts bring crime figures produced by the police in relation to issues of race into severe doubt with regards to their reliability. Given the several racially prejudiced variables impinging on the production of unverifiable crime figures by a police force that has been found to be institutionally racist even by a government-sponsored study such as *The MacPherson Report*, these crime figures are simply not credible. Given that there is a very strong and as yet unchallenged perception within the community that the police are prejudiced, it is unsurprising that the ethnic minority communities

find it pointless to report racist incidents to people whom they consider to also be racist.

III. The Escalation of Tensions into Rioting: Provocation or Pro-action?

The release of last year's crime figures by Chief Superintendent Eric Hewitt to support the contention that Asians are primarily responsible for the majority of racially-motivated attacks aggravated an already simmering situation. Hewitt's timely disclosure was widely reported in the media, particularly in the local press, leading to the entrenchment among many Oldham residents of the highly disputable notion that Asians have been responsible for most racial crimes against whites. The figures supported the idea that Asians in Oldham are proponents of racism, rather than victims of a system which itself is institutionally racist. This notion was, naturally, strongly resented by the Asian community, which understandably saw the release of the figures as adding insult to injury. This established an environment of incendiary proportions.

The intervention of right-wing white supremacy groups who attempted to exploit the vulnerability of the situation for their own political gain, was the spark that ignited the already seething tensions. Press reports along with the testimony of members of the local community show that the riots in Oldham occurred as the culmination of five weeks of racial abuse orchestrated by right-wing white extremists against the town's ethnic minority community. Verbal as well as physical abuse, including vandalism, by white youth reached levels of virtual impunity as the local British National Party (BNP) mounted its campaign for the General Elections. It has been approximately 22 years since such groups were operating in Oldham with such high profile. Now these groups have exploited white working-class frustrations to attempt to gain support for their anti-Asian, and more specifically anti-Muslim, sentiments (see Chapter IV).

The essence of the conflict began with attempts by the white supremacists to hold a march in Oldham on the 31st March 2001. Seven Asian Councillors - five Kashmiri, two Bengali, one Pakistani, all of whom are Muslim – organised a public meeting to counter the march, supported by a variety of organisations including the National Union of Teachers (NUT), the Anti-Nazi League (ANL) and political leaders from the Labour and Liberal Democrat parties, among several other groups. They succeeded in preventing the occurrence of the march.

A second march was announced for the 5th May. This time Asian community leaders accepted the advice to the community from the police, to stay in their homes, not to go outside, and allow the police to deal with the problem. Although the march was banned, National Front and British National Party supporters nevertheless gathered at the town centre and walked around in gangs with the apparent intention of intimidating locals. By evening, they gradually moved out of the town centre towards the Asian outskirts of areas such as Glodwick, Coppice and Werneth. Gathering in and outside local pubs, and in a drunken state, they intimidated and hurled racist abuse at local Asian residents. The news of their presence spread around the community and led groups of young Asians to come out. Minor skirmishes resulted, also involving the police, leading to some arrests – as yet there were no major incidents.

On the 27th May a third march was held. Up to this time, right wing groups continued to operate within Oldham aggravating communal tensions by roaming Asian areas and conducting themselves in a manner amounting to racial intimidation. This included not only verbal abuse, but also acts of vandalism. By the time of the third march, right wing supporters began moving nearer to Asian areas with greater frequency. At around 8 PM, in the area of Clarksfield on the outskirts of Glodwick, white and Asian children of around 11-12 years began quarrelling. Their parents intervened and reportedly a white mother used her mobile to contact a large gang of white youths. Subsequently, up to 10 youths arrived and began violently wrecking the neighbourhood. Community pleas to the police to provide protection were ignored on the pretext of distributing officers equally throughout the town. When police arrived, they did not apprehend or arrest the gang despite pleas from the community to do so. The violence drew in a group of Asian youth whom in contrast, were arrested by police. Those arrested were detained without charge and released the next morning. Eventually, a gang of 200 white thugs raided the unprotected road, terrorising its occupants, hurling racial abuse, swearing and smashing windows, and then fleeing into nearby pubs. Though warned by community leaders and police not to allow the youth into their pubs, pub owners ignored the calls and permitted them entry. The actions prompted the formation of larger groups of Asian youth outraged at the impunity with which the gangs were operating, and further clashes ensued.

Thus on Saturday night, several hundred Asian youths went out into the streets in response to the month-long campaign of racial animosity, hurling petrol bombs and bricks at police and pubs tolerating the racist groups. The violence broke out again on Sunday, with petrol bombs thrown and burning barricades of tyres and furniture erected.³³

It is important to recall the context of the build-up of racial and religious animosity behind this outburst of fury. Mike Luft of the Anti-Fascist organisation Friends of Searchlight has commented that: “For the last 18 months every group of away football supporters and groups like the BNP and Combat 18 have declared open season on Oldham.” Indeed, “The ferocity of attacks on Oldham’s Asians is starting to resemble a mini-war” – so much so that local Asians and anti-racism campaigners have good reason to suspect the far-right of being behind several brick and petrol bomb attacks on white homes and pubs in relatively mixed neighbourhoods like the West Street Estate just to incite racial hostility. Asian shops and organisations in Glodwick have received a constant stream of hate mail and threatening telephone messages. And worryingly, the violence has already spread to nearby Rochdale, home to a similar number of Asians, where last month a suspected far-right militant threw a nail bomb into an Indian take-away.³⁴

IV. The Role of Islamophobia

Political leaders in the town have admitted that the riots had been stirred up by right-wing white extremists. Both the police and the Prime Minister concurred. Local police have pinned immediate blame for Saturday 26th May’s riots on “outside influences” - mainly ultra-rightwing English nationalists and white power supremacists - stirring up trouble ahead of the general election. Even Chief Superintendent Hewitt, highlighted the particular role of the National Front (NF) and British National Party (BNP) in stirring racial tensions in the town.

However mainstream politicians and policy are not exempt from this charge. The rise of the BNP is set in the context of the highly controversial way that central government has been perceived and to a certain extent admitted to have maligned Muslim aspirations. It has targeted Muslim groups in its new Terrorist Act as a primary Labour achievement, stating that the Act "at last proscribes terrorist organizations like Hamas, Hizbollah and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. The Act specifically prohibits fund raising for these organizations and from spreading their brand of hatred in Britain."³⁵ In this regard it is also worth noting the finding of the Muslim Election 2001 campaign where it was felt that "Labour's self-confessed record demonstrates the party's highly partisan attitude toward the varied faith communities in the UK. A comparison of Labour's domestic support of projects for the Jewish and Muslim communities, as well as foreign policy in the Middle East in relation to Zionist and Muslim demands, shows clearly where Labour's sympathies lie. The Muslim community remains disenfranchised, underrepresented, and its needs flagrantly ignored, in contrast to Labour's courting of the apartheid regime of Israel and its British supporters."³⁶

Yet disturbingly the BNP has portrayed the Muslim community as a favourite of New Labour. The BNP in fact has clearly and unambiguously campaigned on an Islamophobic ticket. Nick Griffin's campaign literature in the run-up to the elections begins:

WINNING FOR WHITE OLDHAM: WINNING FOR YOU

Crazy, isn't it? Muslim rioters tear the town apart, attacking white people, houses and shops, and petrol-bombing and shooting at the police - and yet whites like us are getting the blame!

It ends:

*Nick Griffin and the BNP, or the pro-Muslim Labour party? Make up your own mind and think of your family as you vote British National Party*³⁷

Statements by right-wing groups reveal that their efforts were primarily directed against Oldham's Muslim community. An article on the race riots on the BNP's website was titled: 'The Situation in Oldham: Ethnic Cleansing Muslim Style'³⁸. Regarding the riots, the article commented that "this is how extremists within the Muslim community in Oldham are repaying the hospitality of the people who built the town and allowed them to settle there by the tens of thousands." Another BNP article remarked on how the Party has been able to use the riots to further exacerbate racist and Islamophobic sentiment to thereby recruit members: "Media coverage and the personal experience of scores of thousands of white people every year are combining to make gangs of Muslim thugs the best recruiting sergeant the British National Party has ever had."

It is clear from the literature that the BNP has put out on its website that its main target within the ethnic groups is the Muslim community. In an interview on BBC2's 'Newsnight' on 26th June, BNP leader Nick Griffin commented that this is "not an Asian problem, but a Muslim one." There are a number of instances on-line, where the BNP has distinguished between previous riots and the nature of the Oldham and Burnley riots, e.g. Nick Griffin writes regarding the Brixton riots in comparison with current ones:

Overwhelmingly, the riots were directed at lootable shops, and policemen (including the few black ones), and not at white civilians except those who happened to be driving cars needed for barricades. Two instances of rape were the work of individual criminals taking advantage of the general chaos; they were not carried out with the knowledge or support of the rioters.³⁹

Implicitly those “responsible” for the Oldham riots in the BNP perspective had anti-‘white civilian’ targets, and very serious criminal intent. Quite apart from the persistent tone of attack in such articles, the implied constituency of rioters has been clearly identified in other literature. The BNP’s ‘Boycott Asian Businesses’ campaign leaflet encourages the white community to “to take action to put pressure on the Asian community . . . by boycotting their shops and take-aways. Not ones owned by Chinese or Hindus, only Muslims as it’s their community we need to pressure.”⁴⁰

BNP literature published and unpublished refers unendingly to alleged Muslim thuggery, ‘the fact that the problem is mainly Muslim-on-white,’⁴¹ ‘How Muslims are attacking the very heart of Oldham’s white community,’⁴² and so on. Its oxymoronically entitled website www.oldhamharmony.org contains a variety of material subheaded, “How the multi-racial fanatics turned a decent, proud, working class community into a mini Bosnia.” Further references are made within literature to the ‘Beirut’ like nature of the Oldham situations. Its linked website, FAIR – Families Against Immigrant Racism,⁴³ claims that ‘girls and women...get abused by Muslims for wearing attractive clothes.’

The perpetuation of these stereotypes is not to be entirely laid at the door of the far-right. The Muslim community see little support in the mainstream media. This is particularly well illustrated in e.g. Polly Toynbee’s article entitled ‘Cradles of Fanaticism’⁴⁴ opposite which there was a picture of Muslim women praying.

This latter example gives an idea of the existence and level of Islamophobic sentiment already extant in mainstream British society which has provided the foundation for far-right strategy. In the Oldham context, a clear battle line has been drawn by the BNP between communities on the basis of Muslim and non-Muslim. Nick Griffin’s comments on Newsnight above, highlight the increasing breakdown of identification of minorities under the category Asian. This breakdown is reflected not only in white far-right categorizations but also within the ‘Asian’ community. Amit Roy states that:

A GROWING number of Indians in Manchester say they no longer want to be described as “Asians” because it places them in the same category as rioting Muslim youths of Bangladeshi and Pakistani origin in nearby Oldham.⁴⁵

Muslims, the youth in particular are doubly alienated by the rise of Islamophobic sentiment from within and without the minority communities arena. They feel themselves to be the victims of this marginalisation. Their perception, based on an analysis of the foregoing seems difficult to dispel. Whilst factors of deprivation and poverty clearly also play a role in this process, it is worth noting the results of the IHRC study into anti-Muslim hostility and discrimination in the UK. In two surveys in 1998 –9 and 1999 – 2000, 35% and 45% of respondents respectively, stated that they had faced discrimination on the basis of their religion.⁴⁶ The largest groupings in this survey were young and professional or in possession of a university education. Within this category they also perceived themselves to have been victims of religious discrimination at much higher levels than the averages cited above. The perception of

discrimination amongst older Muslims was much lower. This has significant bearing on the recommendations made below.

It is worth noting that this profile of victims of religious discrimination mirrors that of the non-Muslim Indian groupings that Amit Roy cites as being, 'well-off, professional, well-educated and integrated into mainstream British life.'⁴⁷ The only difference is religion, as according to Roy those well-integrated are Hindu. It is a perceived distinction he shares with the BNP and one which indicts the current state of anti-discriminatory legislation in the UK.

V. Conclusions & Recommendations

A. Poverty and deprivation need to be tackled in a systematic and equitable way. This equity should be borne out by fuller involvement of the local community from all sectors affected at all levels. In particular there should be transparency and accountability with regard not only to allocation but administration and consultancy costs. Those involved in managing and reporting these processes bear a heavy responsibility to allocate resources fairly, and report accurately the state of these processes. The hitherto unequal application of regeneration and other funds in favour of white communities by local and national authorities coupled with the inaccurate reporting by media and institutions of how this inequality is actually structured has doubly victimized the Muslim minority in Oldham.

B. Institutionalised discrimination by the police and other institutions and authorities needs to be recognized and tackled. An independent enquiry needs to be set up to see the extent to which Islamophobia is prevalent within the major institutions of this country i.e. the police, judiciary, education, politics (with particular reference to foreign policy).

C. The current Race Relations Review needs to listen and take on board the grievances felt by Muslim minority youth. Whilst the elders of the community who are represented by the bulk of community leaders should also be listened to, there needs to be a recognition of youth concerns. The latter clearly perceive themselves to be the victims of discrimination to a much greater extent than previous generations. By refusing to include their voices, any review will lack the ethical mandate it needs, and will instead be seen to be massaging its findings through unrepresentative consultation.

D. The Race Relations Act needs to be evaluated and the limitations of its remit analysed to prevent it reinforcing Islamophobic attitudes. Islamophobia features very strongly in the sights of far right groups in terms of choosing their victims. By putting out anti-Muslim propaganda and encouraging the victimisation of Muslims they are not doing anything unlawful. If similar comments about another faith community e.g. the Jewish community were made in this context they would be unlawful and would not have been tolerated or allowed to be aired. It is this loophole within the criminal justice system that needs to be closed so that Islamophobic attitudes are not encouraged. Muslims are Britain's largest 'ethnic' minority this effectively means that the BNP can and have freely targeted the majority of non-Whites in the country, provided they do so on a religious, rather than racial basis.

This is a precedent that has been set in mainstream society and needs to be addressed urgently.

E. Programmes that aim to bring together the various communities in Oldham need to be organised and effected urgently. The main forums hitherto used for the intermingling of communities i.e. the workplace and housing, have disappeared. The former has disappeared through economic decline, the latter through a divisive and unethical housing policy.

There is now no excuse for the government not to act. The Runnymede Trust, the IHRC and the Derby Report into religious discrimination have all been published. To delay any longer in the light of Oldham and Burnley would not only be unethical but disastrous.

Notes

¹ See Leader, 'When frustration erupts – The lesson of Oldham: politics must listen', *The Guardian*, 28 May 2001.

² Councillor Richard Knowles and Chief Executive Andrew Kilburn (Oldham Metropolitan Borough), letter to *The Guardian*, 18 June 2001.

³ Oldham Borough Council, *Oldham Today: An Overview*, Oldham Borough Information, viewed 19 June 2001, http://www.oldham.gov.uk/borough_info/overview.htm.

⁴ Oldham Borough Council, *Oldham Today: An Overview*, op. cit.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Cited in Leader, 'When frustration erupts – The lesson of Oldham: politics must listen', op. cit.

⁷ Faisal Bodi, Unpublished report on racism in Oldham based on research and interviews during visit to the town, June 2001

⁸ Oldham Borough Council, *Oldham Today: An Overview*, op. cit.

⁹ Faisal Bodi, op. cit.

¹⁰ Oldham Borough Council, *Oldham Today: An Overview*, op. cit.

¹¹ Mark Wainwright, 'Spark that ignited Leeds violence', *The Guardian*, 6 June 2001.

¹² 'The land of plenty faces a shortage of tolerance', *Financial Times*, 30 April 2001.

¹³ CARF Report, *The Politics of Numbers: Police Racism and Crime Figures*, Campaign Against Racism and Fascism, No. 50, June/July 1999.

¹⁴ Raymond Whitaker, 'Oldham is not alone. Other communities are retreating into a form of apartheid', *The Independent*, 17 June 2001.

¹⁵ Faisal Bodi, op. cit.

¹⁶ CARF Report, *The Politics of Numbers: Police Racism and Crime Figures*, Campaign Against Racism and Fascism, No. 50, June/July 1999.

¹⁷ Interview with local community leader, who is also a Community Language Officer in a neighbouring Yorkshire Council, 18 June 2001. Interview with Oldham community youth worker, 4 July 2001. The interviewees preferred to remain anonymous.

¹⁸ Faisal Bodi, op. cit.

¹⁹ Sir William MacPherson, *The Stephen Lawrence Inquiry: Report of an inquiry*, Presented to by the Secretary of State for the Home Department by Command of Her Majesty, February 1999, Chapter 6, Paragraph 39.

²⁰ Dodd, Vikram, 'The MacPherson experience', *The Guardian*, 18 February 2000.

²¹ See Leader, 'When frustration erupts – The lesson of Oldham: politics must listen', op. cit.

²² Lee Jasper, 'Brickbats for Oldham', *The Guardian*, 29 May 2001.

²³ CARF Report, *The Politics of Numbers: Police Racism and Crime Figures*, op. cit.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Interview with local community leader, who is also a Community Language Officer in a neighbouring Yorkshire Council, 18 June 2001.

²⁶ Interview with Asian member of the local community, 18 June 2001.

²⁷ Lee Jasper, 'Brickbats for Oldham', op. cit.

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- ²⁸ <http://www.manchestersonline.co.uk/news/content.cfm?story=106714>.
- ²⁹ Jay Rayner, 'The hidden truth behind race crimes in Britain', *The Observer*, 18 February 2001.
- ³⁰ For discussion see for example PAIH Report, *Race Crime Reporting: A Vote of Black Confidence or a Rise in Racism?*, Positive Action In Housing, Glasgow, March 2000, http://www.paih.org/pages/race_crime_reporting.htm.
- ³¹ CARF Report, *The Politics of Numbers: Police Racism and Crime Figures*, op. cit.
- ³² Ibid. CARF elaborates: "The particular malpractices revealed arose with the introduction of performance targets for police forces during the 1990s which brought strong pressure 'from above' for measurable results. Much effort has gone into recording and analysing crime figures so as to assess performance. But, as has now become clear, the actual crime figures produced have borne little relationship to reality. Various techniques have been devised by police forces to enable them to give the impression that fewer offences were being committed in their areas so as to suggest improvements in performance. For example, by changing the category under which a crime is recorded its apparent seriousness can be reduced; or secret files of crime records, which are excluded from the published figures, can be employed to lower the apparent crime rate. Other techniques have been used to doctor the figures for detection, such as persuading those in custody to admit to other unsolved crimes in return for favours."
- ³³ This account of the run-up to the riots is based on several interviews with members of Oldham's local community, 18 and 20 June 2001.
- ³⁴ Faisal Bodi, op. cit.
- ³⁵ Advertisement in *The Jewish Chronicle* June 1, 2001
- ³⁶ Muslimelection 2001 Press Release
- ³⁷ <http://www.oldhamharmony.org/oldgreen.pdf>
- ³⁸ <http://www.bnp.org.uk/resources/ethnic.htm>
- ³⁹ <http://www.bnp.org.uk/resources/cleans.htm>
- ⁴⁰ <http://www.bnp.org.uk/resources/old27.pdf>
- ⁴¹ <http://www.oldhamharmony.org/1.htm>
- ⁴² <http://www.oldhamharmony.org/pubs.htm>
- ⁴³ <http://www.rightsforwhites.org/>
- ⁴⁴ Polly Toynbee, 'Cradles of Fanaticism'
- ⁴⁵ 'Indians try to escape catch-all 'Asian' tag' Amit Roy *The Telegraph* 19 June 2001
- ⁴⁶ 'Anti-Muslim Hostility & Discrimination in the UK, 2000' Islamic Human Rights Commission
- ⁴⁷ Amit Roy op.cit.