
You can't sow corn and reap cassava

Gus John reflects upon racial strife in Britain.

It is unbelievable witnessing what is going on across the country just now and it is a sad indictment of political leadership in Britain these last 75 years. I have long maintained - and said and wrote it often enough - that the nation would pay a heavy price for focusing on 'Prevent' and assuming that jihadists are in every Muslim home and community and every Madrassa, radicalising young Muslims, rather than the state confronting the domestic terrorism of the Far Right that for decades has resulted in the maiming, physical and mental, as well as the murder of far too many South Asians and Africans in our communities.

Just shy of 60 years ago, I arrived at Heathrow Airport from Grenada, a former British colony, two months before the 1964 General Election. Immigration and Race dominated that election, with Peter Griffiths, the Conservative candidate in Smethwick in the West Midlands declaring: '*If you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Labour*'. Griffiths won his seat with a 7.5 per cent swing from Labour, defeating the shadow foreign secretary, Patrick Gordon Walker. 60 years later, less than a week before the 2024 General Election, a campaigner for the Reform party was calling the outgoing prime minister 'a effing Paki'. Reform went on to win five seats.

In the intervening 60 years, we witnessed a proliferation of far-Right groups and of British citizens burying their loved ones as a result of 'Nigger Hunting' and 'Paki-bashing'. Murders of British citizens from South Asia became normalised in much the same way that police killings (euphemistically called 'deaths in custody') were normalised, with the police involved in such incidents being treated as witnesses rather than suspects, even when the deaths resulted from their use of excessive force.

The likelihood is that neo-fascist perpetrators of such human rights atrocities are now sitting in the British parliament and running around in police uniforms.

It was not so surprising, therefore, to hear a Reform MP say in response to calls for a policeman caught on camera kicking a black man in his head and then

stamping on it during a fracas at Manchester Airport, that the policeman should be given a medal rather than being criticised.

It took decades of lobbying before we persuaded parliament to even contemplate designating certain crimes 'racially aggravated'. It was not until 1998 that the Crime and Disorder Act (Sections 29 to 32) created specific racially or religiously aggravated offences.

In the early 2000s, I was commissioned by the Crown Prosecution Service to conduct research as to how prosecutors made decisions regarding cases involving race and gender, including racially aggravated offences. David Calvert Smith QC was the director of public prosecutions at that time. I chose 1500 closed cases from each of ten CPS areas for my team and me to study. I was alarmed by the repeated pattern of defence lawyers and CPS engaging in plea bargaining and making deals which involved prosecutors agreeing to drop the racially aggravated component of the offending. So, for example if the window of a shop belonging to a Pakistani shop keeper was smashed but in addition the shop was sprayed with racial abuse, prosecutors would agree to a guilty plea to criminal damage, in exchange for the racially aggravated element of the charge being dropped. This was a systematic pattern. I gathered the evidence and presented it to the then Attorney General (Peter Goldsmith QC). He was rightly quite appalled by what was going on and immediately issued instructions preventing prosecutors from reaching deals which meant that the racially aggravated aspect of offending could be dropped. Racially or religiously aggravated offences attracted stiffer sentences.

Many of us are old enough to remember the Hungerford massacre on 17th August 1987 in which Michael Ryan, a white male, murdered sixteen people by gunshot before turning the gun on himself. Nine years later, 13th March 1996, Thomas Hamilton, another white male, murdered 16 young children and their teacher in Dunblane. On both occasions, the entire nation was in mourning and in a state of shock. There was no hint of revenge or civil unrest, nor did anyone

automatically assume that the gunman might have been a foreign national, let alone a jihadist.

But, when the racialisation of immigration segues into the racialisation of crime ('mugging', 'sus', drug-pushing and now senseless murders), the country has a nervous breakdown and every aggrieved and dispossessed white citizen, every ferret eyed racist, every Far Right 'patriot', feels they have a civic duty to claim their country back by any means necessary.

Sowing corn over many decades

No politician of any party could distance themselves from the racist rhetoric which helped to create the context and political culture in which rumours could spread like wildfire regarding the ethnicity, faith and immigration status of the suspect in the murder of the young children in the dance class in Southport on Monday 29th July.

Not only was the attacker assumed to be Muslim and given a Muslim sounding name, he was also reported as having entered Britain illegally on one of those 'small boats' that have been the subject of political discourse for the last few years and especially in the run up to the recent general election.

In May 2023, Home Secretary Suella Braverman, a barrister, described small boats crossing the English Channel as 'an invasion', adding that small boat crossings meant 'heightened levels of criminality'. This led to nine organisations referring her to the Bar Standards Board for breaching the barristers' code relating to the use of racist language. <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/may/14/suella-braverman-accused-of-breaching-barristers-code-over-racist-language>

Two years earlier, her predecessor Priti Patel was fulminating and venting her frustration with lawyers who had intervened on behalf of their clients to prevent her deporting 45 convicted offenders to Jamaica (cf GJ's Column, When Crime Meets Race, Jamaica Gleaner, August 2021)

There are two major fault lines at the heart of this discourse as it is presented both by those in government and by the Far Right.

First, Government

The discourse on Race and Immigration is conducted by leaders of state, the political class and the media at this time as if it was still 1968, when Enoch Powell was warning of 'rivers of blood' and of Britain in its essence being eclipsed by a growing black presence. There appears to be no acknowledgement of the existential reality that is Britain today, i.e., the reality of a settled multi-ethnic society whose citizens are

getting on with their lives, pursuing their ambitions and contributing to the society and its progress wherever they find themselves. They are not 'immigrants', first, second, third, fourth generation 'Windrush', or any other banal designation. Their citizenship defines their Britishness, a Britishness that cannot be denied them because the society defines them and their offspring as BAME, assumedly for all time.

Politicians, black and white, who play to the gallery, therefore, and engage in a discourse that projects those citizens as 'other', not belonging and not having the right to belong; the right to have and practise a religion and belief of their choice, a right to cultural production and expression, are simply maintaining the boundaries of division and rendering citizens vulnerable and unentitled.

The Far Right

Britain has signally failed to deal with the legacy of empire and the impact of that legacy on its definition of itself and its relationship with the rest of the world. Crucially, it has failed to assist its citizens, especially the white majority, in understanding their own history, as well as Britain's legal and moral obligations to those it once colonised and whose natural resources it continues to extract and exploit for their benefit and to the detriment of those former colonies themselves to this day. Sivanandan, the late director of the Institute of Race Relations, summed it up most succinctly in seven simple words when he said: 'We are here because you were there'.

But populism serves the political parties and the ruling classes well. The Far Right cannot be allowed to claim that they are speaking on behalf of the dispossessed, disenfranchised and left behind in the society, their central thesis being that all of the latter were caused by the presence of black people through immigration and by the state's failure to ensure that no more are let in.

When the rioters and their supporters demand defiantly 'we want our country back', they are purporting to speak for the whole of white Britain. Theirs is a collective 'we' that separates us from the 'othered' and unwanted, except that the unwanted now constitute a growing proportion of the 'we' by virtue of marriage and parenthood. But it is also a 'we' that is differentiated by class, upbringing, education, wealth and access to opportunity. Differentiated, too, by employers who could not function without employing the unwanted. The irony is that when they who 'want their country back' get injured during their rioting and their mission to displace the unwanted and they end up in hospital, they are more than likely to have unwanted nurses, doctors and other health practitioners tending to them.

There is no acknowledgement of the right of refugees and asylum seekers to want to seek refuge in the UK, or of the UK's obligations to them under the Refugee Convention. There is even less acknowledgement of the difference between refugees and those former colonial subjects who are in Britain because we have a right to be here.

And even if the Southport murderer were a Muslim who had come on a small boat, his crime could not be attributed to, or seen to be emblematic of the conduct of all Muslims in Britain, documented or not, any more than the racist murderers of black people over the years, including Stephen Lawrence, could be seen as representative of the conduct and disposition of white Britain overall.

The suggestion, therefore, that while the criminality of the Far Right on Britain's streets should be condemned, the nation should concede that their gripes about the deprivation they continue to suffer while they see refugees and asylum seekers being housed in hotels are legitimate is completely bogus. By that logic, British citizens who are descendants of enslaved Africans should have been organising themselves into cadres to burn down every English heritage building and every institution that is still dripping with the blood, sweat and tears of their ancestors, and should continue to do so from one generation to the next until Britain makes full recompense for 400 years of barbaric exploitation.

This nation cannot legitimise the racist and xenophobic targeting of a body of people who bear no responsibility whatsoever for how the British state organises itself to discharge its responsibilities under the Refugee Convention.

There are those who claim that it is nonsensical and unhelpful for the prime minister or the director of public prosecutions to seek to bring charges against the rioters under the Terrorism Act. The Far Right and elected representatives of the people among them are seeking to intimidate and unleash terror and violence upon entire communities, defined by ethnicity and religion and to coerce the Government into denying their human rights in pursuance of racist ideological objectives. To this end, they pull black drivers out of their vehicles, beat them up and set their vehicles alight. They target hotels and hostels housing refugees and asylum seekers and set fire to them with murderous intent, thus sending a message to government about its accommodation of unwanted people. They have no interest in the likelihood that a high percentage of the residents in those buildings, whom they might have killed, would later be assessed as being legitimate refugees and asylum seekers and given the right to remain in Britain.

Yet, as the tragic events unfolded in Southport last week, the Home Secretary Yvette Cooper appeared to be studiously avoiding the use of terms such as racism,

Islamophobia and right wing incitement to racial hatred and racial violence. The thuggery, hooliganism and mindless violence she and many in the media were calling out was not considered to be racially and religiously aggravated and motivated by Islamophobia, even when the local Mosque was deliberately targeted.

But clearly, terrorism is something that Muslims indulge in. When white racists lead the pack and carry out potentially murderous activities, it is just a matter of a spree of mindless violence and hooliganism, devoid of any racist or Islamophobic motive and murderous intent.

For decades, this nation has engaged in a racist discourse at the highest levels and have exploited the feelings of legitimate neglect that swathes of the population have had. Those in government have encouraged the view that that neglect has been accentuated and worsened by the growing size of Britain's Black and Global Majority population. What we are seeing today is the result of dancing around the National Front, the British National Party, Column 88, Britain First, the English Defence League and others of them for decades. If you sow corn, don't expect to reap cassava. Surely, Brexit has taught us that?

Hopefully, white Britain would use these ugly and deeply troubling events to take a good look at itself, determine what it wants the hallmark of the society to be, insist that human rights and valuing all its people be placed higher up the political and policy agenda and take collective action to hold the executive to account. For our part, the Black and Global Majority must refuse to join the chorus of condemnation of the white working class as being intrinsically racist and supporters of Britain's growing right wing and their grand dukes such as Tommy Robinson, Nigel Farage and other Reform leaders.

Historically, the white working class across Britain fought for and won the political space within which we have sought to affirm our rights and build communities of resistance to racism and class oppression. A necessary part of that project has entailed engaging sections of that class in confronting their own racism and understanding: a) that our interests and demands are not and have never been antithetical to theirs and b) their and our relationship to the state and how it functions in relation to building a society with the hallmark of equity and racial, social, climate and cognitive justice.

Now is the time to show concrete signs of collective responsibility to and for one another.