

THE BLACK AMERICAN-BLACK BRITISH CONNECTION

by
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The Ditchley Foundation, rich in tradition for sponsoring Anglo-American think tanks on various subjects pertinent to the well-being of both countries, held a conference at its Ditchley Conference Center near Oxford, England, to examine the Scarmon report. Lord Scarmon headed the inquiry on the Brixton disorders which took place during the summer of 1981. The Scarmon report is likened to our Kerner report on national disorders in the USA following the riots during the 60s. This small group of approximately 20 persons representing top Thatcher government officials, Scotland Yard, representatives of the House of Lords and House of Commons, outstanding educators, and leaders of the Commission for Racial Equality. In addition to these local representatives, individuals from Germany, Sweden, Australia, Japan, France and the US were invited to make input from their national perspective as to the causative factors of similar disorders, if there had been any, in their respective countries. Therefore, the cross-disciplines of criminologist, sociologist, politicians, jurists, civil rights advocates, law enforcement, community advocates and religious leaders were representatives for this weekend of open scrutiny of the dynamics which gave rise to the riots in England.

Lord Scarmon opened the conference by making the following statement "Brixton was the first model of urban conflict. It was the first to use the petrobomb. Looking for the cause, motivation of our other related factors is like looking for the Holy Grail. The disorder was a spontaneous reaction of West Indians aged 15 and up against the police. It was not a race riot. There were racial

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dimensions but it was centered against the police, and not the establishment. There is nothing basically wrong with our society. These problems are transitional and have emerged since 1950. Institutional racism does not exist in Britain: but racial disadvantage and its nasty associate, racial discrimination, have not yet been eliminated. Evidence which I have received, a fact which I have outlined in my report, leaves no doubt in my mind that racial disadvantage is a fact of current British life."

This set the tone for the intellectual intercourse that was to take place for the next 72 hours. Lord Scarmon's comment was followed by the Rot. Hon. Timothy Raison, M.P Minister of State, Home Office, who further set the tone for the weekend conference by stating that the 1980 and 81 urban unrest was not a race riot. There were only disorders between young blacks and police and that race just happened to be the common factor.

After three days of hard examining of the variables active in the historical development of the riots, British officials were completely unmoved from their original fixed attitude about British blacks and the dynamics that gave rise to the riots.

The first disturbing and unsettling observation of the British leadership was simply their perspective of the West Indian community. They chided the West Indian community for their divisiveness, lack of initiative to do more for their people, and their inability to become a part of the total political process. They reinforced an attitude of low expectation in education as well as limited social participation, which is an attitude held within the wider community. They rationalize this conception of British black by merely reflecting that the majority of them based upon their skills would fit within the working class.

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The second distressing observation of the attitudes of the British was the impact that the Reagan administration has had on them in an effort to reinforce their already discriminatory attitudes towards blacks. They are piggybacking on the withdrawal of supports in affirmative action by the Reagan administration and speak very firmly that they feel he is correct in not discriminating against whites in an effort to upgrade blacks. They insist they have a program called reverse discrimination, which at best is a limited affirmative action by providing skilled training for certain government types of work, none in the private sector at all.

The third observation - the rising Asian population in Britain is used as a buffer between the British whites and the blacks. During the weekend discussion, black culture and advances were advanced against the Asian culture. The Asians are business persons and are rising in their economic status much faster than the black population. Further observation was that the new Naturalization Act which took place in 1981 which inhibits West Indians from boasting of two citizenships - that of British and that of Trinidad, or Jamaica - will be used as an instrument to stabilize the flow of blacks into the country and if needs be to encourage many of those residing in Britain to return home. The most distressing thing about that new act is that if a Trinidadian mother who has held dual citizenship gives birth to a child while living in England, that child cannot gain full citizenship until the age of 10 with the proviso that it remains in the country consistently until that age. If the parent returns back to Trinidad for an extended period of time, the parent will lost its potential of becoming an English citizen.

Though this law is applicable to the Asians as well as to the West Indians, it is unlikely that any Asians will be returning back home as is the tradition with the West Indian. Pitts, a black member of the House of

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Lords, calls this Naturalization Act dispicable.

At the end of the conference I was afforded the opportunity to return to London and to share with 12 different community groups and religious leaders for a period of days to assess first hand my observation of the West Indian community. It is true that the West Indian community is diversified because they come from different islands, and, though there are common experience, many of their cultural traits are quite different. Contrary to the view expressed by the British leaders that they are a group of people vieing for government handouts for their own little private programs and are not concerned with the blacks as a whole, I found little difference between their aspirations, motivations and highly skilled leaders than my normal visit throughout America to one of our 1,800 organized communities in the NAACP.

It was very interesting to visit the headquarters of the Commission of Racial Equality, which is a government sponsored agency to deal with the problems of minorities in the country, and to learn that this institution is headed by a handpicked British white, the executive director is Asian, and the administrator is black. This institution is nearly powerless in terms of legally constituted authority to correct injustices, however, it has involved itself within the lives of the West Indian community and becomes possibly the major vehicle of redress on the part of the people.

The black community was very outspoken and it had its own observations as to the British government and the plight of their young people. Unlike America, the police department has much more decentralized autonomy. This form of discensus proliferates the influence of blacks as they seek redress against the strong arm of the police department. Scotland Yard does not

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have, according to the blacks, that much influence over the police in Brixton and West Croydon. There are no high elected black officials in the country. There is no grass root organization involved specifically in the area of civil rights. There has not emerged any responsible, respected ward.

Although in every section of the country which we visited the black community leadership, parallel qualities were synonymous to that which can be found in this country - that was one basic missing factor. There does not exist basic black universal institutions such as the black church in America to serve as a vehicle or a platform for unified efforts. There is no black church establishment in England which speaks with one voice or has any approach to a common understanding on a wide range of issues. The nearest approach to such an establishment is the Afro-West Indian United Council Churches which has been encouraged by the Shallow church and which is theograpalling with such elementary things as offices, clerical support and overall structure. The leadership is still timid, well-meaning but untrained and has not yet grasped the philosophy of religion teaching with reference to society. The Church of England and the Catholic church has traditional white leadership, and West Indians, those saved and considered in its membership, cannot look to the leadership of those churches to promote their cause of racial justice in the country.

However, since 1966 the rising *Apostolic* faith in the country is gaining members while many of the white churches are loosing their congregations. While many of the white churches emerging and selling off their buildings at commercial value rather than extending their facilities to the black churches for accommodation.

It must be noted that the black church in England is a phenomenon of the late 19th century political situation and the British Caribbean were the

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European based churches were in a privileged position in which black worshippers held inferior status. Black people did not officiate in predominantly white areas and like any public show in which the best seat went for the highest prices, black people were relegated to the worst of those positions in those European based churches. This social and racial dominance discouraged black participation in white led churches in the Caribbean and drove some black people to seek a black religious identity which often reflected as well the social protest of believers of all kind.

Unlike America,

of Caribbean

The problems of the young people the community usually called "West Indians" are an accumulation of historical, social and economic circumstances which in the the absence of positive and sustained measures they will become Britain's submerged community. The grave danger is that they are unable to communicate with the broad community and the broad community is incapable of understanding what their real plight is. Employment, underemployment in the West Indian community is not simply a question of earning for a living. Those conditions are bound up with their social status, which in turn must reflect in their personality and social attitudes. West Indians are generally regarded as a simple, homogeneous group and not as one which, like other communities, have a social structure. As a result, the patterns and discontent among West Indians is generally summed up by saying, "young people are not willing to accept/^{the}low status, dead-end jobs of their elders".

The British have a short memory and do not reflect the history of the Second World War. Black West Indians fought side by side with the English and after the war was over, many of them came to England to enjoy the victory won by their sweat, labor and tears. Just to find a segregated, abusive, class-structured society. The young people in question are the children of that new generation of immigrants to England from the islands.

The facts are that the elders were forced to take on forms of employment, some of which were new to them. They were also going into jobs which were made vacant by the transfer of white labor, often younger labor, to jobs with better pay, better conditions, and better prospects. The only advantage to the West Indian in that case was that in some of those jobs there were not those sweated conditions under which they labored in the West Indies. For others, although the wages were low in the jobs that they got, they were able to adjust their way of life to suit. Those who

did not care to work overtime to increase their earnings, pursued educational courses which lead to their personal advancement and change from the menial jobs.

Working overtime, the elder West Indians compensated for their low status jobs and poor social image by acquiring some of the material factors of everyday life. The children were therefore brought up in better conditions, though with no better social image than their elders. In later years, the pursuit of material factors was done at the social and emotional detriment of young children and the stability of family life. As a result there has been a continuous mood of discontent and frustration which to date has produced at least two generations of fairly confused young people. Well meaning in many cases, but very insecure. Among those earlier West Indians were people who had education or skills and who were drawn from the mere privileged or enterprising strata of the West Indians. But those qualifications were disregarded because of hostility of prejudice. They raised the status of the jobs they took by their dress, manner of social outlook and general behavior. This is evidenced by the people in catering and in sections of the transport industry, and particularly British rail and London transport.

It is within the context of this low status employment,^{and} underemployment, that the social stigma of the young people of the West Indian community must be considered. There are several reasons for this dilemma. Side by side with the increase and intensity of social antagonism and prejudice directed at West Indians as being non-white, has been the lowering of esteem which has added other pressures upon them.

When we compare the traditional Anglo-American relationship which is inseparable, the close ties between two conservative governments, Reagan and Thatcher, the high unemployment rate in the two countries that is adversely affecting blacks more than any other peoples; the future of black Americans

as well as black British could be enhanced by a communication connection. The fact that the **BLACK** British have invited us to share our experience in the field of civil rights. They recognize the need for a national organization and unity among their leadership and are willing to extract from the **BLACK** American experience those elements which can be applicable to seek redress of their needs. When we assess amount of American dollars that flow between these two countries in order to perpetuate this Anglo-American world leadership myth, blacks in these two countries should create a parallel black-Anglo-American connection to insure that the future of all of its peoples are tied up in the destiny of the larger community as well.

The black British community has not only sent for all of our print materials, they are sending some of their leadership to this country in the very near future on specific tasks of studying our techniques in hopes of setting up a similar institution in their country. This black connection should have the eyes of the world cast upon the treatment of blacks in these leadership countries as these two countries seek to police the world.

Other comments that may have some significance are as follows:

- 1) Street crime is a slow form of rioting.
- 2) There should be a bubble-up policy as well as a trickle-down policy. The British were saying that the blacks must bubble up as well as they must trickle down and do something for

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them. 3) The German politician-psychiatrist indicated that the British should take a look at the psychological plight of those teen-agers who rioted. Take a look at their internal controls and coping mechanisms and age [?] preparation turmoil. Obviously, they were suffering from alienation and rejection syndromes. He further indicated that there was a political motivation against the establishment because young people- [REDACTED] feel insecure about their future and that a deep feeling is that the future does not offer much hope with an overcast of nuclear war. When you add ~~the~~ racial discrimination and alientation on top of this universe of young people, then maybe you can get an understanding of some of the dynamics which cause a riot. 4) It was expressed by another member of the group that the hopes that everybody's going to be better-off is no longer a marketable one and that every riot has some kind of message that is very important, and that the British ought not shy away from seeking the real truth. Participants in the group made it very clear to the British that the leadership of their country should make it very clear as to where it stands ^a on multi-racial society.