**‘Publish and Be Damned?’ Race, Crisis, and the Press in England During the Long, Hot Summer of 1976**

**Abstract:** The summer of 1976 was an under-cited moment of significance in the history of race and immigration in post-war England. A series of major incidents appeared to highlight lasting racial fractures in English society, often exacerbated by the provocative editorial decisions of the press. This article, focused particularly on events in the Lancashire town of Blackburn, analyses some of the ways in which constructions of a “crisis of race relations” were developed in local and national newspapers during this tumultuous summer.

**Keywords:** anti-racism; far right politics; newspapers; race relations; racism.

**Introduction**

In Southall, the morning of Friday 4 June 1976 at first appeared to be just like any other. Suresh Grover, a twenty-two year old Hindu who had moved south to the West London suburb from Lancashire a couple of years earlier, was walking down the high street when he saw it: a pool of blood on the pavement. There was no cordon, no sign indicating what had happened, but there was a policeman standing nearby. ‘It was just an Asian’, the officer remarked, upon telling Grover that someone had died in that very spot during the night. Grover acted immediately, covering up the blood with cloth and circling it with bricks.[[1]](#endnote-1) The unfortunate victim was a Sikh student, Gurdip Singh Chaggar. He was just eighteen years of age, stabbed to death in what was popularly (but not officially) interpreted as a racially motivated attack.[[2]](#endnote-2) Over the following days many young Southall Asians took to the streets in protest at Chaggar’s murder and at the conditions that enabled it. Far from being recognised as a legitimate response to the rising tide of racism in 1970s England, most clearly indicated by the growth in prominence of neo-fascist parties like the National Front (NF), these protests were widely dismissed by the national press as unacceptable acts of violent aggression. The *Sun*, for example, honed in on isolated (and non-fatal) attacks on a pair of white youths in Southall amidst the disturbances of the weekend following Chaggar’s death. The front page on Monday bore the headline ‘Youth Knifed After Asian Siege’. Mention was made of Chaggar but attention focused predominantly on the protests, characterised as predominantly violent. Southall was described as a ‘race fury town’ and the actions of ‘Gangs of Asians [who] smashed cars and squatted in the road demanding better police protection’ were presented as proof of a worrying turn towards ethnic minority vigilantism.[[3]](#endnote-3)

Southall was not the only part of England that saw racial tensions rise alongside the soaring temperatures of the (literally) long, hot summer of 1976. During the late spring and summer months of 1976 ethnic minority groups across the country experienced an atmosphere of profound agitation. In May the Lancashire town of Blackburn was the site of an unprecedented electoral victory for neo-fascism, with the NP winning two seats on the local council. At the end of August, meanwhile, the annual Notting Hill Carnival dissolved into violent conflict between black youths and the police. In between these flashpoints, alongside occurrences in Southall, there were a myriad of other, ostensibly smaller (but still significant) events. All can be seen to have exposed the fragility of multicultural society in England during the “long 1970s”, a period that could easily be defined through the prism of racial politics: as beginning with Enoch Powell’s notorious “Rivers of Blood” speech in 1968 and concluding with the widespread disturbances of 1981. This article places 1976 at the centre of this longer period. Recalling the assertion of researchers at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) that the wider ‘organic crisis’ that the nation experienced in the 1970s was often ‘expressed as, and defined by, “a crisis of race relations”,[[4]](#endnote-4) it considers the role of the national and local press in constructing narratives of crisis around the theme of race during these months. Through these narratives newspapers amplified (consciously or otherwise) the arguments of the far right, in the process further affirming the ‘re-racialisation’ of Englishness.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The clear importance of the media in shaping attitudes towards race and immigration in the post-war period has given rise to an expanding corpus of literature in recent years. Much of this work has focused upon the role of visual mediums, illustrating the various ways in which film and television have helped audiences envisage (and, at least in some cases, accept) multiculturalism.[[6]](#endnote-6) It would be inaccurate, given the preponderance with which newspapers appear as sources in histories of race and immigration, to suggest that print media has been ignored. Still, there is a surprising paucity of historical studies focused specifically on the role of newspapers, especially given the clear importance that they have played in influencing popular anti-immigration sentiment. Certainly there is a need for more work to supplement analyses such as that of Adrian Bingham and Martin Conboy who, in their brief survey on the subject, highlight both the rise in ‘alarmist language’ about immigrant numbers after 1958 and the willingness of newspapers to recycle Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech into the 1970s even whilst nominally critiquing him.[[7]](#endnote-7) Moving beyond the national press is, as Rachel Yemm has recently argued, a necessary part of furthering research in this field. Yemm – in analysing the role of local newspapers and television in the infamous 1964 Smethwick General Election campaign – has stressed that the distinctive properties of non-national media allow for particular forms of anti-immigration reporting that look to maintain ‘fiercely protected and racialised’ local identities. This included providing forums – readers’ letters pages, for instance – in which immigrant presence could be debated by members of the local community.[[8]](#endnote-8)

Writing letters to the newspapers provided an avenue for anti-immigration sentiment that was an integral part of creating, in Bill Schwarz’s words, ‘a new affective [white] nation, for whom Powell was spokesman and for which the neighbourhood worked as principal axis’.[[9]](#endnote-9) The idiomatic localism that was often embedded in racist letters to the press may, therefore, be said to have been particularly suited to non-national papers. Letters pages, whilst not the sole focus here, are helpful for thinking about the importance of editorial decision-making. As Elizabeth Buettner and others have pointed out, newspapers can mould public debate on subjects like race through supposedly independent venues like letters pages.[[10]](#endnote-10) The curated letters page, which purports to represent the opinion of the readership at large but is instead carefully policed, reflects the newspaper as a whole. In 1976 local and national papers alike generally claimed to simply portray the reality of race relations in England. In practice, however, what emerged was less a reflection than a construction, rooted partly in wider discourses of crisis but – crucially – also in the dialogues of the aforementioned affective community that emerged through Powellism. This will be shown through a focus on Blackburn in the late spring and early summer of 1976. In drawing its conclusions this case study will then be assessed alongside Southall and Notting Hill. First, however, it is necessary to detail the rise in tensions that occurred before the summer dawned.

**Rising Tensions in 1975-76**

In early 1976 the NF, Britain’s most prominent neo-fascist party, split in two after a tedious power struggle between long-term leader John Tyndall and his short-term usurper, the former Conservative John Kingsley Read. Having lost control of the NF in court Read and his allies formed the National Party (NP), a breakaway organisation.[[11]](#endnote-11) This can hardly be seen as a major moment in history but it did mean that, by the spring, there were two parties utilising the same strategy of street-based provocation. Through holding marches (often through areas of towns and cities with high minority populations) replete with flags and drums these parties would not only become more visible to potential supporters, the theory went, but also strike fear into their opponents. One impact of this approach was the prompting of left-wing anti-fascist mobilisation, creating a public order dilemma that became clear to the public at large when an anti-NF protestor was killed in a melee with police in Central London in June 1974. The national press largely blamed the protestors for the tragedy, not endorsing the NF but expressing support for its right to conduct its activities.[[12]](#endnote-12) The same level of concern was rarely demonstrated for the incitement to racial violence contained within the NF’s very ability to hold these marches. The rhetoric adopted by NF speakers at such events was always provocative. An April 1975 march in Bradford, for example, concluded with Tyndall declaring: ‘We have seen the decaying parts of this city today, which reflect the decay of the country as a whole, and there are many who feel there are racial frontiers no longer worth defending.’[[13]](#endnote-13) Some recipients of such messages took up the task of defence themselves, as indicated by the rise in racial assaults during the 1970s.[[14]](#endnote-14)

The neo-fascist far right was just one of the reasons that the Labour government was planning to strengthen race relations legislation in 1976. Unfortunately for the Home Office, the immediate response to its proposals in late 1975 was not altogether encouraging. David Stephen, Director of the Runnymede Trust, applauded the government for not waiting for a fresh wave of ‘Powellite immigration hysteria’ in order to act but suggested that the proposals made would do nothing to tackle underlying problems of ethnic minority deprivation.[[15]](#endnote-15) The potential dangers of this were then elaborated upon in the *Observer*, in an article alarmingly and provocatively entitled ‘The time-bomb of race’. Once again the government was praised for its recognition of the need for a new strategy but criticised for its failure to go deeper into dealing with inequality. If, the piece argued, the ‘grievances’ felt by a ‘less patient’ younger generation of black Britons – who suffered from ‘growing delinquency’ – were not put right, then Britain was certain to suffer from ‘the kind of militancy generated by aggravated ghetto communities’.[[16]](#endnote-16) This was a troublingly Powell-lite interpretation of race relations from the nation’s most liberal newspaper: one that argued the necessity of stamping out racism but which also heavily implied (as far right Conservatives and the NF/NP did) that outbreaks of racial violence were almost inevitable.

By the close of the year the pressure had begun to ratchet. In mid-December, two far right Tories offered antagonistic verdicts on the future of race relations. Nicholas Budgen, who had replaced Powell as MP for Wolverhampton South West in March 1974, declared that ‘the conspiracy of silence on immigration could provoke white people to violence’.[[17]](#endnote-17) A few days later Harold Soref (the former MP for Ormskirk) told a gathering of Young Conservatives that ‘No other country would enable countless hundreds of thousands of immigrants to enter without qualifications and receive free social security […] It is only a matter of time before there are race riots in Britain’.[[18]](#endnote-18) These predictions of violence, and their obvious efforts to bring Powellist rhetoric back to the forefront of the public consciousness, did not bode well for the government’s attempt to make 1976 a year of progress for race relations. In the event it took less than a week for the storm clouds to rumble anew, with Powell entering the fray. Having only made one speech on the subject since December 1973, he returned to the issue of race and immigration with a vengeance. In a speech in Egham on 5 January Powell argued that the situation had become far worse than he had imagined back in 1968: ‘What never occurred to me […] was that eight years later on we should still be heaping that funeral pyre not just at the same rate but twice as fast’. Pointing to a Home Office clerical error that had underestimated net immigration in 1973, as well as what he referred to as the ‘natural increase’ engendered by high immigrant birth rates, Powell inferred conspiracy: ‘the state is willing to let this happen; and not only the state but the political parties by their silence and connivance […] whose interests do the parties serve?’[[19]](#endnote-19) Newspaper coverage predictably aided Powell’s cause not only through granting him publicity but also by buying into the inference that there had been a deliberate cover-up. The *Daily Mirror*’s editorial comment on the speech, for instance, was headlined ‘The public’s right to know’.[[20]](#endnote-20)

Soon afterwards sections of the press effectively took up the case of one Robert Relf. A fifty-one year old sometime member of various extremist organisations Relf was sent down for contempt of court after refusing to take down a ‘For Sale’ sign outside his house that also included, initially, the words ‘Positively no coloureds’ and, later, the moderately less offensive ‘English family only’.[[21]](#endnote-21) He went on hunger strike in prison and the NF and others protested in his name, prompting several clashes with anti-fascists (who again took the brunt of the blame).[[22]](#endnote-22) More damagingly the press made Relf into something of a martyr by misleadingly implying that he had been imprisoned under race relations legislation rather than for contempt of court. As one astute letter writer noted in the *Guardian*, Relf had ‘caused the media and much of the public to see the questions as he chooses to define them, not as they actually are’, resulting in ‘a nationally circulated picture of a Kafka-esque victim, thrown behind bars for his brave stand against arbitrary authority’.[[23]](#endnote-23) In the middle of the Relf saga, meanwhile, the media seized upon the news that Malawian Asian refugees would be coming to Britain. The *Sun* was among the worst offenders. On 4 May it led with the headline ‘Scandal of £600-a-Week Immigrants’, in reference to two homeless families newly arrived from Malawi being put up at a four star hotel in Crawley because cheaper establishments were full. The paper took care to implicate the families themselves as well as the council, stressing that ‘The first thing they did’ upon arrival ‘was to ring the local Social Security Office’, from where they began drawing £20 or more a week in benefits, only to supposedly have ‘told officials that is not enough’.[[24]](#endnote-24) This marked, in the words of E. J. B. Rose, Director of the Survey for Race Relations, the start of a six week period in which ‘the national press […] collectively and quite unwittingly contributed to a climate in which it was possible for racial violence on an unprecedented scale to erupt in this country’.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Before the month was out tension had been pushed into overdrive. In a lengthy Commons speech Powell again suggested that the government was repeatedly lying as to the scale of migrant entry to Britain.[[26]](#endnote-26) Most damagingly, however, he then went on to assert that the flood of violence he had predicted eight years earlier was becoming a reality:

There are cities and areas in this country […] where assaults upon the police are matters of daily occurrence and where in daylight, let alone after dark, ordinary citizens are unwilling and afraid to go abroad […] such areas [are] being transformed beyond all recognition, from their own homes and their own country to places where it is a terror to be obliged to live. Yet […] there is one factor which has not yet been injected […] That factor is firearms and explosives […] The thing goes forward […] until a position is reached in which […] compared to those areas, Belfast today will seem an enviable place.[[27]](#endnote-27)

The press seized upon Powell’s latest provocative prediction of racial conflict – uncritically branded ‘Powell’s Warning’ on the front page the *Sun*.[[28]](#endnote-28) As a Runnymede Trust pamphlet highlighted, Powell’s speech had been but one contribution to a lengthy debate on demographic change in Britain, yet it still ‘received almost exclusive newspaper coverage for the next two days’.[[29]](#endnote-29) Most of the major papers, broadsheet and tabloid alike, accepted (with varying degrees of hesitation) that Powell was right (even if most made half-hearted attempts at condemning his precise choice of words) and that immigration and race relations had entered into a crisis territory where the government had to act. The *Daily Mail*, for example, emphasised its belief that ‘The conning has to stop. Emotive words are not needed to convey the strain on the British people’s forbearance and the damage to race relations, now and in the future, that will be brought about if the Government were to fail to act swiftly and decisively’.[[30]](#endnote-30) Powell’s comments would only become more problematic over the following weeks, especially in the light of events in Southall. At the time at which he made this speech, however, the tension was already being felt in East Lancashire.

**John Kingsley Read and the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph***

Nowhere in England experienced the rising tensions of the spring and early summer of 1976 as acutely as Blackburn. It was here that, in May, British neo-fascism receive minor electoral successes when two NP candidates (including the aforementioned John Kingsley Read) were elected as councillors. Despite being one of the more obvious signs of the increasingly serious threat now being posed by racist antagonism, this result gained little coverage in the major national papers. The months and weeks preceding this temporary, but nonetheless troubling, breakthrough illustrated the ease with which white diagnoses of racial discontent could become amplified in specific local settings, especially when far right rhetorics overlapped with the sensationalist tendencies of the press. In Blackburn the crisis of race relations was made real by the most prominent local paper: the *Lancashire Evening Telegraph* (*LET*), which spent much of the first half of 1976 problematising various local race relations issues. In so doing, the paper aided Read, who was already known as a local politician: before joining the NF during its protests against the arrival of Ugandan Asian refugees in 1972 he had twice stood unsuccessfully as a Tory council candidate.[[31]](#endnote-31)

Journalist Martin Walker suggested that Read resembled the American segregationist George Wallace, both physically and in his ability to give ‘the same impression of being a plain-spoken, common man, speaking for the people’.[[32]](#endnote-32) Certainly he voiced his racial prejudices bluntly. In a BBC interview in late 1976 Read decried what he saw as the loss of white British identity in forthright, simplistic terms, complaining that ‘multiracialism is like the old coffee and cream, you either want coffee or you want cream: if you have the two together you get a pale brown mixture which is neither one nor the other’.[[33]](#endnote-33) At NP rallies this down-to-earth racism frequently became something more extreme. In one campaign speech captured by television cameras, he directly invoked the possibility of violent rebellion as a means of reclaiming a white England: ‘We will fight […] and we’ll fight you with every bone, every nerve, every feeling, every ounce of blood we’ve got. We will have our country back!’[[34]](#endnote-34) Whichever facet of Read’s political persona won over voters, it seemingly was not confined to the ward he was elected to represent. The anti-fascist journal *Searchlight* reported that, shortly after his election to the council, a NP march led by Read through Blackburn town centre featured loud chants of the movement’s chief rallying cry – ‘If they’re black, send them back’ – and was received with noticeably warm applause and cheers from many of the townspeople.[[35]](#endnote-35)

Read was given no shortage of opportunities by the media to promote his views. In Blackburn the *LET* became a useful vehicle for his brand of intolerant politics in the run-up to the May elections. A particular controversy arose over a debate on stall allocations at the Darwen market in April.[[36]](#endnote-36) In news broken by the *LET* itself, the local council had intervened to award three Asian traders extra stalls at the market. This prompted a group of white market traders to complain to the local Race Relations Board (RRB) that they were being discriminated against. For the *LET* this accusation of anti-white discrimination was worthy of the front page of its 7 April edition, in a story augmented by dissenting councillor Brian Brooks being quoted as saying that, on issues of race, it was becoming necessary ‘to tip-toe around the situation as though we were in Nazi Germany’.[[37]](#endnote-37) Whilst an RRB spokesperson was quoted in response, Brooks’ comments were not in any sense challenged by the paper editorially, which instead focused on rejecting criticism that its reporting was in any way inflammatory. The *LET* ‘makes no apology for telling [the market tenants] and the public at large about [the case]’, read a front page editorial comment that continued by asserting that ‘Race relations disputes have to be handled with care and sensitivity […] But they are essentially public matters. That, in a free society, is the overriding consideration’.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Through this use of the concepts of free speech and of transparency the *LET* moulded a narrative that played into conspiracy theory-esque perceptions that race relations legislation was being designed to unfairly promote the cause of ethnic minorities at the expense of white Englishmen and women. The following day Read expanded upon this theme, with the *LET* devoting a prominently placed story to his comments on the Darwen affair. He claimed that the stall allocations were indicative of elitist political distaste for ordinary citizens: ‘The majority of councillors at Blackburn are traitors to their own people. They will bend over backwards to accommodate the Left-wing idealists.’[[39]](#endnote-39) Like Brooks’ comments the day before, Read’s inflammatory words were not challenged by the *LET* beyond the inclusion of a basic response from an RRB spokesperson. This response was barely noticeable, given that approximately a third of the article was taken up with quotes from Read and that the headline quoted his inference of treachery, not that this was the only accusation Read made. He also implied that the Race Relations Act – ‘in theory, supposed to apply to all colours and creeds’ – was deliberately biased against white Britons: ‘I have never heard of any successful submission by a member of the indigenous population.’[[40]](#endnote-40) The *LET* had already set in motion a narrative based around free speech and vague hints of conspiracy, but it now allowed Read to escalate the situation and to set the agenda for the council election that was about to take place.

From glancing at the *LET* letters page in early 1976 one could be forgiven for assuming that there was a wide groundswell of support for this racist agenda in Blackburn. The months preceding the May elections saw the page filled with those who (explicitly or implicitly) were NP supporters. One regular contributor was a Mrs Lloyd. She was frequently given space to air views extremely similar to those of Read: ‘Our politicians don’t seem to care about the problem they have created by allowing this great influx of immigrants to our country. In fact, the politicians have failed in their duty to the people of this country, which is unforgivable.’[[41]](#endnote-41) She was often joined by the likes of Edward Adamson, an NP member who unsuccessfully stood in the same ward as Read in May 1976. He was allowed to voice his party’s opposition to the potential opening of a small mosque on Accrington Road without his affiliation being disclosed by the paper, thus helping to create the impression (when the party’s efforts on the subject were reported) that the NP were particularly in tune with local concerns.[[42]](#endnote-42) When the potential mosque fell through one letter writer was given the space to credit the turn of events to the NP: ‘If there had been no election pending and the National Party had not organised the residents of Accrington Road into an effective opposition, there is no doubt at all that this mosque would have been bulldozed on the unfortunate people of that area.’[[43]](#endnote-43) Letters like this, which presented the NP as the only route out of a crisis scenario, undoubtedly contributed to the party’s breakthrough in May 1976.

Still, the height of the paper’s seeming tacit support for the NP came immediately after the May elections, when Read was immediately served notice that he had contravened the Race Relations Act. An affidavit was served to him at the count at which his victory was announced. Rather than focusing on the fact that Read had not only been accused of but actually admitted to the offence, the *LET*’s front page coverage offered sympathy to the new councillor, described as having had his victory ‘sensationally soured’. It was also implied (somewhat misleadingly) that Read was likely to serve time in prison, and thus be disqualified from taking up his new position on the council.[[44]](#endnote-44) In reality this outcome was always unlikely if Read pledged not to repeat the offending comments, which he did in court on 21 May.[[45]](#endnote-45) The suggested threat of jail time had already served a purpose for Read, however. One letter given prime position by the *LET* the Monday after Read’s election was effectively addressed to the NP leader directly: ‘There is no disgrace in going to jail, Mr Read. Women did it years ago to give women the right to vote. If you go to jail it is for having the guts to say what millions of people are thinking, but are afraid to say in case Big Brother hears them.’[[46]](#endnote-46) All of the letters published on this date – 10 May, four days after the election – were about Read and the NP. None of them were overt critiques of the party. Given that the paper is extraordinarily unlikely to have not received any anti-NP letters in the immediate aftermath of the election, it is reasonable to interpret this as evidence of *LET* editorial support for Read. Acknowledging the support he had received in (and, effectively, from) the paper, Read was quoted on the front page after making his pledge not to break the act again informing his admirers that he would stick to his guns: ‘I do not want the people of Blackburn to think that I have backed down. I will continue to fight for the rights of the white population.’[[47]](#endnote-47) With the aid of the *LET* Read believed he had established himself as the man to deal with the crisis, as the valiant defender of Blackburn’s oppressed native Englanders.

**Blackburn on the Brink**

The situation in Blackburn belatedly began to attract a modicum of attention from national newspapers. The *Morning Star* highlighted the NP’s success towards the end of May by reporting on an anti-racist march in the town under a headline that quoted Communist Party organiser Bill Ward describing Blackburn as ‘fast becoming the Alabama of this country’.[[48]](#endnote-48) A week later the paper’s reporter Jim Arnison painted Blackburn as ‘the once friendly Lancashire town’ that had reached crisis point and was ‘moving towards the edge of disaster’.[[49]](#endnote-49) Long-term resident Ismal Sola clarified the situation: ‘There has never been any racial conflict here before and there is not really a position yet of any outbreak of strife. What we have is apprehension because of recent events.’[[50]](#endnote-50) Thus this was, Sola suggested, a crisis in the literal sense of the word: Blackburn found itself at a moment of decision in which key actors in the town had to decide whether to proceed further down the path of backing explicitly racist politics or to return to its relatively peaceful former self. Read was not the only target for Sola’s criticism, however. ‘The Telegraph has a lot to answer for over what has developed in this town’, he clarified, pointing to the paper’s habit of using immigration and race relations scare stories and of flooding of the letters page with racist correspondence.[[51]](#endnote-51)

As Arnison and Sola also highlighted, the *LET* doubled down on its stance with the coverage it gave to anti-NP protests in Blackburn. Unsurprisingly, given the paper’s general slant, its editorials tended to pour scorn on anti-racist protestors. When a demonstration against the NP was held on 21 May, for instance, the main front page headline read ‘Demo: Brick Hurled at Read’s Window’, immediately painting the protestors as unreasonable extremists and ignoring the fact that the brick in question was thrown the night before the march, quite possibly by someone entirely unconnected to the demonstration.[[52]](#endnote-52) This was reflective of the suspicion with which the paper generally treated anti-racist resistance by the local Asian community. On 4 June, for example, the *LET*’s front page bore the headline ‘Asians turn down aid to “sort it out”’. The actual story detailed how local community leaders had rejected increased help from Asian community groups from outside Blackburn, but the way the story was presented made it appear as if Blackburn’s Asians did not want to calm the atmosphere in the town.[[53]](#endnote-53) It also tended to highlight any apparent divisions within the community. So when Kaliq Choudhry, chairman of the local Pakistani Welfare Association, called for protestors from his community taking part in an anti-racist march to avoid violence, the *LET* used the headline ‘Protect the whites appeal to Asians’, implicitly presenting demonstrating members of Blackburn’s Asian community as a threat to the town’s white majority.[[54]](#endnote-54) Frequently the paper allowed others to speak for the town’s Asian population. On 3 June it even gave Read this opportunity:

Mr Choudhry rang me to say he was very disturbed at the escalating violence in this town. I put him in the picture and said most of it was coming from the immigrant community. We have evidence that vigilantes have been harassing young [white] boys in Little Harwood. Our branch chairman Mr Robert Horman saw it happen’[[55]](#endnote-55)

By presenting the conversation solely from Read’s perspective, and not questioning his interpretation of the situation in the town, the paper erased Choudhry and the community he represented from the story – except as a hostile force, rather than one under attack. This was not the only element of everyday life for Blackburn’s Asians that the *LET* removed from the narrative. As both the *Observer* and the *Sunday Telegraph* reported in early June, racial violence in the town was on the rise.[[56]](#endnote-56) The *LET* covered such violence sparingly when it referred to it at all.[[57]](#endnote-57)

During this period, however, things did begin to fall apart for Read and the *LET*. Two days in a row, on 31 May and 1 June, the *LET* had to defend itself against accusations of racism and pro-NP bias made both on television and in the aforementioned *Morning Star* article.[[58]](#endnote-58) Tellingly the paper devoted more space to these rebuttals than it did to providing coverage of racist violence in the town. More damagingly, however, on 12 June Read gave a speech at a rally in the East End of London in which he referred to the murder of Chaggar eight days earlier with the words ‘One down, one million to go’.[[59]](#endnote-59) This remark created a problem for the national media as well as for the *LET*. As Polly Toynbee reflected in the *Observer* the following week, in publishing Read’s remark the paper may (as she suggested many newspapers regularly were) guilty of ‘act[ing] like closet racialists, and not think[ing] carefully through all the implications of all media handling of race issues’.[[60]](#endnote-60) Toynbee recognised that Read’s comments fitted all too well into the sensationalist coverage many national and local papers had given race relations issues over the preceding months, to the point that they could logically be seen as an extreme outcome of this same coverage.

Back in Blackburn, Read’s remark posed a serious problem for the *LET* in that, unlike his provocative comments in the past, it threatened to inflame the situation in Blackburn beyond the point of no return. The paper did give Read a chance to excuse himself, in which he claimed to be opposed to all violence and to have meant his comments not as an incitement but as a lament. This unconvincing reasoning was rather undermined by the fact that it came alongside a sinister promise:

If I am jailed the authorities will unleash a lot of trouble. The public outcry over the jailing of Robert Relf will be nothing compared with the reaction if I go inside […] No one has ever seen a march of the National Party at which my members have caused trouble. But if I am not there to speak to them and control them I cannot be responsible for the consequences.[[61]](#endnote-61)

While the *LET* was still relatively kind to Read in is phrasing of the headline, which stressed his disavowal of violence, the fact that the paper printed the threatening comments that came with this denial was clear indication of its desire to dissociate from Read and the NP. By the end of the summer Read had lost his privileged position in the *LET*, although the paper did not completely back down on its approach to the reporting of race relations issues. After local MP Barbara Castle compared NF and NP policies to those of Nazi Germany, for example, the paper published a number of letters critical of her remarks.[[62]](#endnote-62) By the end of the year Read, rendered increasingly impotent both by the controversy that surrounded him and by a number of party dilemmas (including the resignation of his fellow NP councillor), was reduced to having to write letters to the *LET* in order to get his messages across. In one December example published by the paper Read claimed that support for him had only grown. ‘I hope and I expect to be elected the next Member of Parliament for the Blackburn constituency’, he announced, no doubt to the delight of many members of the affective racist Blackburn community that still read (and wrote to) the *LET*.[[63]](#endnote-63) The paper effectively replaced Read with the (by comparison) moderate Tory Ian McGaw, who shared its distaste for anti-racist protests in the town.[[64]](#endnote-64) Blackburn did not quite return to normal, but explicitly racist political activity by the NF and NP dropped considerably in 1977.

**Southall, Notting Hill, and Assessing Press Responses to the Summer of 1976**

The presence of a far right politician with a local reputation undoubtedly made the situation in Blackburn in 1976 particularly distinctive. The *LET* enabled Read to perform a radicalised Powellite role in East Lancashire, using the most influential local newspaper both for publicity and to forge (with the help of supporters who appeared on the paper’s letters page) a sense of communal racist opposition to further immigration and multicultural integration. As was the case on a national scale during the winter of 1975-76, the discursive opening was provided by ideas of transparency and free speech, implicitly or explicitly contrasted against ideas of conspiratorial secrecy and of oppressive race relations legislation. In Blackburn this was used to manufacture a sense of crisis in the pages of the *LET*, demonstrating the ease with which minor incidents (such as the debate over market stall allocations) could become triggers that provided ample space for racist politicians. Blackburn did not dissolve into disorder during the summer of 1976, despite Read’s provocations, the sense of unease hanging over the town (captured in the fearful predictions of the *Morning Star*) and the prejudiced depictions of anti-racism offered by the *LET*. Instructive as a case study for understanding the different ways in which far right and press agendas could combine to damage the cause of good race relations, then, it is still worth briefly looking at events in Southall and Notting Hill to give a more complete picture of the summer of 1976.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, the national press response to the protests that followed the murder of Gurdip Singh Chaggar on 4 June focused not on the meaning behind these demonstrations of unrest but on a negative perception of British Asian youths, presented as prone to violence. Alongside the aforementioned example of the *Sun*, perhaps the worst offender was the *Daily Mirror* which opened its front page story thusly: ‘Racial violence has erupted in London yesterday as hundreds of Asians took to the streets on a rampage of vengeance. Screaming “Blood for blood” they beat up Whites, battled with police, and attacked cars.’ Chaggar’s murder was not mentioned until the third sentence then was immediately sidelined to allow a comparison with the 1958 Notting Hill riots.[[65]](#endnote-65) This hyperbolic depiction of events was made even more troubling by the editorial comment. Headlined ‘The Asian Mutiny’ it attempted, as was typical of the tabloids and of many a local paper across England, to censure Powell (whose latest speech was accused of frightening Southall Asians) whilst ultimately blaming the victims of racism themselves, who the headline directly implicated as akin to colonial traitors to the metropole by virtue of their actions.[[66]](#endnote-66) When police officers (of whom there were around 1500 present) clashed with black youths at the Notting Hill carnival in late August a similar tone could be found in several newspapers. The *Sun* took the opportunity to launch a short series on ‘The Two Faces of Black Britain’.[[67]](#endnote-67) The series took as read the fact that ethnic minority youths were now ‘ready to fight back’ and posed sensationalist questions such as ‘Do blacks take more than they give?’ and ‘Is it [the carnival violence] the end of a great ideal?’[[68]](#endnote-68) Whilst most of the coverage of Notting Hill (like that of Southall) acknowledged that there were reasons behind the outbreak of anger, these reasons were generally obscured behind attempts to diagnose the violence that had occurred as evidence of a racial crisis.

Local papers in Southall and Notting Hill were (relatively speaking) more sympathetic to those in their communities affected by racism. The overriding tone conveyed by both the *Southall Gazette* and the *Kensington News & Post* in response to events in 1976 was one of regret. Both largely avoided sensationalisation. Nonetheless, like the nationals, both papers failed to accept the radicalised anti-racism that lay at the heart of the disturbances. In Notting Hill events took the direction they did after black radicals (led by *Race Today* editor Darcus Howe) resisted attempts (publicly endorsed by members of the police) to move the carnival from its symbolically important Notting Hill location.[[69]](#endnote-69) Events in Southall were part of a nationwide wave of anti-racist resistance on the part of Asian youths who felt their elders were too passive in combatting everyday racism. Chaggar’s death was the proverbial straw that broke the camel’s back.[[70]](#endnote-70) The *Gazette*, however, took every opportunity to dismiss the idea that the murder was racially motivated and, by extension, to ignore the day-to-day racial prejudice that the youth were angered by. ‘The danger is that one innocent student may be turned into a martyr; a symbol of oppression; a reason for defiant protest’, suggested the lead editorial, arguing that it was misleading that many had ‘linked the tragedy with the National Front—as if some great conspiracy had been brought to bear on the streets of Southall’.[[71]](#endnote-71) The *News & Post*, meanwhile, published letters from many of the white Notting Hill residents who were opposed to the carnival, which one reader suggested made them ‘second-class citizens’.[[72]](#endnote-72) After the event, the paper did acknowledge that the police were at least partly culpable for the violence, but it seemed to have little awareness of its own role in causing tension during the run-up to the event.[[73]](#endnote-73)

Even in cases where the tone was essentially sympathetic towards minority groups, then, press reporting of race relations in 1976 still had a tendency to overlook crucial elements of anti-racist ideology and to avoid acknowledging the problematic role of the press in causing or exacerbating racial tension. Newspaper editors, at both a local and a national level, did a poor job of balancing the competing demands of selling papers and reporting responsibly. Was this a case of widespread, conscious controversy baiting, of ‘Publish and Be Damned’ (as a Runnymede Trust pamphlet speculated)?[[74]](#endnote-74) This article has, I believe, shown that the reality was a little more complex. It has shown that local and national newspapers shared a predilection towards seeing race relations in a state of crisis, to the point that they readily seized upon opportunities to promote this narrative. All the papers mentioned, from the liberal left *Guardian* to the apparently far right sympathising *LET*, have shared this quality. Moving into the late “Long 1970s”, including events like the Battle of Lewisham in 1977 and the riots of 1981, the press continued to associate race relations with the idea of crisis (interpreted as a pejorative term) all too willingly. This, I suggest with the examples given in this article in mind, is indicative of a general press tendency to instinctively associate racial difference with conflict and tumult.[[75]](#endnote-75) Rather than simply being vehicles for simplistic anti-immigration sentiments, then, the local and national press in 1976 can be characterised as having absorbed the re-racialised ‘syntax of Englishness itself’, articulated by Powell and (less eloquently) by the likes of Read.[[76]](#endnote-76) This is not to say that newspapers uniformly endorsed the far right, but by the 1970s they were profoundly influenced by its arguments in offering their perspectives on multicultural society.

1. **Notes**

   . Kavita Puri, “The Pool of Blood That Changed My Life”, *BBC News*, August 5, 2015, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-33725217/. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . Official interpretations can be found in: “Five Youths on Murder Charger”. 1976. *Midweek Gazette*, June 8; Gary Gurmeet. 1977. “The Killers of Chaggar Get 4 Years”. *Midweek Gazette*, May 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Barry Mattei and Peter Bond. 1976. “Youth Knifed After Asian Siege”. *The Sun*, June 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . Solomos, Findlay, Jones, and Gilroy, “Organic Crisis”, 21. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . On this, in relation to the 1950s and 1960s, see: Schwarz, “The Re-Racialisation of England”. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . See, for example: Malik, *Representing Black Britain*; Schaffer, *Vision of a Nation*. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . Bingham & Conboy, *Tabloid Century*, 213-16. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . Yemm, “Immigration, Race and Local Media”, 99-100. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . Schwarz, *White Man’s World*, 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . Buettner, “‘This is Staffordshire Not Alabama’”, 716; Richardson & Franklin, “‘Dear Editor’”, 191. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. . Walker, *The National Front*, 187-91. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . For an example of this sort of coverage, see: *Daily Mail*, 17 June 1974. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . “Clash Erupts at National Front Rally”. 1975. *Bradford Telegraph & Argus*, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . Bowling, *Violent Racism*, 42-45. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . David Stephen. 1975. “‘Yesterday’s White Paper is Unique…’”. *Guardian*, 12 September. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. . “The Time-Bomb of Race”. 1975. *Observer*, 14 September. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. . “Silence on Race Will End in Violence, Says Budgen”. 1975. *Wolverhampton Express & Star*, 13 December. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. . Evans, *Publish and Be Damned*, 16. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. . Enoch Powell, Speech to the Rotary Club of Egham, 5 January 1976 (CAC POLL 4/1/11). [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . “The Public’s Right to Know”. 1976. *Daily Mirror*, 6 January. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. . John Ezard. 1976. “Man Goes to Prison Over ‘Racial’ Notice”. *Guardian*, 8 May. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. . See, for example, the coverage in: *Birmingham Post*, 17 May 1976. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. . Edward Countryman. 1976. “The Publicity Message of Mr Relf”. *Guardian*, 24 June. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. . “Scandal of £600-a-Week Immigrants”. 1976. *Sun,* 4 May. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. . E. J. B. Rose, “Foreword”, in Evans, *Publish and Be Damned*, 7. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. . *Hansard (Commons)*, Vol. 912, 48-52. 24 May 1976.  [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. . Ibid., 53-54. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. . “Powell’s Warning”. 1976. *Sun*, 25 May. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. . Evans, *Publish and Be Damned*, 20-24. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. . “When the Conning Has to Stop”. 1976. *Daily Mail*, 25 May. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. . Walker, *The National Front*, 136. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. . Ibid., 176. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. . “Right at the Front”. 1976. BBC Radio 4, 23 September. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. . “The National Party”. 1976. *World in Action*, Granada, 22 November. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. . “A Tale of Three Cities”. 1976. *Searchlight*, June. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. . Darwen is a neighbouring town but is administered in local authority terms as part of Blackburn. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. . David Allin. 1976. “Stallholders Going to Race Board”. *LET*, 7 April. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. . “For This We Make No Apology”. 1976. *LET*, 7 April. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. . David Allin. 1976. “Councillors Branded ‘Traitors to the People’”. *LET*, 8 April. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. . Mrs Lloyd. 1976. “Failing in Their Duty”. *LET*, 21 April. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. . Edward Adamson. 1976. “A ‘Dirty Political Game’”. *LET*, 5 April. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. . K. Heald. 1976. In “Letters”. *LET*, 26 April. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. . David Allin. 1976. “Jail Threat to Kingsley Read”. *LET*, 7 May. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. . David Allin. 1976. “Kingsley Read Set Free After Pledge”. *LET*, 21 May. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. . M. Wright. 1976. “Jail is No Disgrace”. *LET*, 10 May. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. . Allin, “Kingsley Read Set Free”. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. . Jim Arnison. 1976. “Blackburn – Britain’s Alabama”. *Morning Star*, 24 May. The notion of understanding racial tension in Britain through American comparisons was not new: Perry, “‘Little Rock’ in Britain”. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. . Jim Arnison. 1976. “Edge of Disaster?” *Morning Star*, 31 May. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. . Ibid. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. . Raymond Yates & Carl Nagaitis. 1976. “Demo: Brick Hurled at Read’s Window”. *LET*, 22 May. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. . “Asians Turn Down Aid to ‘Sort It Out’”. 1976. *LET*, 4 June. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. . “Protect the Whites Appeal to Asians”. 1976. *LET*, 11 June. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. . “‘No Violence’ Plea After Race Talks”. 1976. *LET*, 3 June. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. . Dilip Hiro. 1976. “More Attacks on Asians as Right Gets Stronger”. *Observer*, 6 June; John Smalldon. 1976. “How Blackburn Came to the Brink of Race Violence”. *Sunday Telegraph*, 6 June. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. . See, for example: “Attacks: Police Meeting Sought”. 1976. *LET*, 31 May. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. . “Editor Hits Out at Race Bias Allegations”. 1976. *LET*, 31 May; “Race Row: Responsible Lead is Needed”. 1976. *LET*, 1 June. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. . These remarks were widely reported, first in: “East End Boy Dies After Race Marches”. 1976. *Observer*, 13 June. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. . Polly Toynbee. 1976. “Media’s Name is Mud on Race”. *Observer*, 20 June. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. . David Allin. 1976. “Violence is Wrong – Read”. *LET*, 15 June. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. . Peter Hodges. 1976. “MPs Combine Against Racialism”. *LET*, 10 July. See, for a particularly stinging rebuke: R. Chesney. 1976. “Policies Not Insults Needed”. *LET*, 15 July. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. . John Kingsley Read. 1976. “Motive Was to Smear”. *LET*, 1 December. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. . “‘Call off Anti-Racism March’ Plea”. 1976. *LET*, 25 June. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. . John Jackson. 1976. “Rampage of Vengeance”. *Daily Mirror*, 7 June. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. . “The Asian Mutiny”. 1976. *Daily Mirror*, 7 June. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. . “The Two Faces of Black Britain”. 1976. *Sun*, 31 August. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. . Jeremy Sandford and Tony Harris. 1976. “Black Britain”. *Sun*, 31 August-2 September. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. . Bunce and Field, *Darcus Howe*, 220-21. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. . Ramamurthy, *Black Star*, 25-29. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)
71. . “Take Off Pressures”. 1976. *Southall Gazette*, 11 June. [↑](#endnote-ref-71)
72. . M. Freeman. 1976. “Carnival Makes Us Second-Class Citizens”. *Kensington News & Post*, 6 August. [↑](#endnote-ref-72)
73. . See the reporting in: *Kensington News & Post*, 3 September 1976. [↑](#endnote-ref-73)
74. . Evans, *Publish and Be Damned?* [↑](#endnote-ref-74)
75. . This mirrors the wider point made in: Solomos, Findlay, Jones, and Gilroy, “Organic Crisis”. [↑](#endnote-ref-75)
76. . Schwarz, “The Re-Racialisation of England”, 74.

    **References**

    Bingham, Adrian, and Martin Conboy. *Tabloid Century: The Popular Press in Britain, 1896 to the Present*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2015.

    Bowling, Benjamin. *Violent Racism: Victimisation, Policing and Social Context*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998.

    Bunce, Robin and Paul Field. *Darcus Howe: A Political Biography*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.

    Buettner, Elizabeth. “‘This is Staffordshire Not Alabama’: Racial Geographies of Commonwealth Immigration in Early 1960s Britain”. *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 42, no. 4 (2014): 710-40.

    Evans, Peter. *Publish and Be Damned?* London: Runnymede Trust, 1976.

    Gilroy, Paul. *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation*. London: Routledge Classics, 2003.

    Malik, Sarita. *Representing Black Britain: Black and Asian Images on Television*. London: SAGE, 2002.

    Perry, Kennetta Hammond. “‘Little Rock’ in Britain: Jim Crow’s Transatlantic Topographies”. *Journal of British Studies* 51 (2012): 155-77.

    Ramamurthy, Anandi. *Black Star: Britain’s Asian Youth Movements*. London: Pluto, 2013.

    Richardson, J. E., and B. Franklin. “‘Dear Editor’: Race, Readers’ Letters and the Local Press”. *Political Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2003): 184-92.

    Schwarz, Bill. *Memories of Empire, Volume 1: The White Man’s World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

    Schwarz, Bill. “‘The Only White Man in There’: The Re-Racialisation of England, 1956-1968”. *Race & Class* 38, no. 1 (1996): 65-78.

    Solomos, John, Bob Findlay, Simon Jones, and Paul Gilroy. “The Organic Crisis of British Capitalism and Race: The Experience of the Seventies”. In *The Empire Strikes Back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain*, edited by Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, 9-46. London: Hutchinson, 1982.

    Walker, Martin. *The National Front*. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977.

    Yemm, Rachel. “Immigration, Race and Local Media: Smethwick and the 1964 General Election”. *Contemporary British History* 33, no. 1 (2019): 98-122.

    **Archives**

    Churchill Archives Centre, Cambridge (CAC) [↑](#endnote-ref-76)