



# HISTORY & POLICY

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## **Met police training still ignores Black history**

*- Historian warns on 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Notting Hill Carnival riots*

Thirty years after riots at the Notting Hill Carnival exposed the depth of mistrust between the Metropolitan Police and London's Black community, a historian is warning that training for today's police recruits continues to ignore the history behind the tensions.

In a new paper to be published on the *History and Policy* website in September, Dr James Whitfield, a visiting research fellow at the Open University and ex-Metropolitan Police Inspector, argues that the historical roots of distrust run much deeper than the Met has acknowledged.

During August Bank Holiday weekend, 1976, the Notting Hill Carnival burst into full-scale violence for the first time, forcing the Met to admit to its troubled relationship with the Black community and review the tokenistic racial-awareness training it had introduced in 1964.

Although this episode is generally seen as an early indication of the strained relationship between Black Britons and the police, Dr Whitfield demonstrates that the roots are to be found much earlier, in the experiences of the first West Indian immigrants in the late 1940s-50s and the reactions of the police and wider community.

But community and race relations training for today's Metropolitan Police officers takes the 1981 Brixton riots and the Scarman Report as its starting point. Dr Whitfield argues that this leaves new police officers dangerously ignorant about Black cultural heritage.

Dr James Whitfield said:

“Conflicts between the police and members of Britain’s Black community did not attract widespread public attention until the Notting Hill Carnival riots of 1976. But the history of relations between the Windrush generation, their descendants and the British police service is now almost sixty years old.

“Black Britons have grown up well-versed in the origins of their predecessors’ contribution to the creation of a multi-cultural Britain. But police racial-awareness training has ignored this history and prevented police officers from developing a fuller understanding of the factors at play when dealing with Black people.

“I do not question the Metropolitan Police Authority’s commitment to equality in the workplace and tackling racial discrimination, or the police service’s efforts to recruit a multi-ethnic workforce that reflects Britain in the twenty-first century. But, in 2004-05, Black people were still six times as likely to be stopped and searched as White people, and Asian people almost twice as likely to be searched as White people.

“Since 9/11, the threat of both international and home-grown terrorism has again placed ethnicity at the forefront of the policing debate, and increased the potential for suspicion or guilt by association and categorisation. Self-congratulatory celebrations of a Britain at ease with its multi-ethnicity are somewhat premature.”

Clarence Thompson MBE is the Chairman of the West Indian Standing Conference.

Commenting on Dr Whitfield’s findings, he said:

“The Met police training manual is very poor. They need people to train them to think properly. Language is important, as is their perception of Black people. They've got to understand that we are law abiding, we want fair play, we believe in equality. The Met have to be the exemplar. Where they lead, others will follow.”

Norwell Roberts was London's first Black police officer, who joined the Met in 1967 and retired in 1997. He believes that the force is too embarrassed to acknowledge its past history

of racist behaviour as part of its community and race relations training for new recruits today. Norwell Roberts said:

"The police service do their utmost to come to terms with their failings with the regard to the Black community, but I think they've failed. I've been telling them this since 1985 when I had the courage to speak out, but nothing has really changed. They seem unwilling or unable to deal with it appropriately and are embarrassed to acknowledge racism. They can't handle it; they're scared of the consequences."

Dr Whitfield's analysis of the origins of the tensions between the Black community and the police reveals:

- West Indians' negative experiences of the Colonial Police before they emigrated, a system of policing described at the 1954 Colonial Police Commissioners' London Conference as "the strong arm of imperial power";
- A lack of government information for the host community to explain the new wave of immigration, creating a vacuum that was filled by alarmist sections of the media and right-wing politicians;
- New immigrants' confusion about the role of British police and sense of injustice when they failed to intervene in incidents of racial discrimination, which were then outside the law;
- British police officers' racial stereotyping of Black immigrants as ignorant, criminally inclined and prone to antisocial behaviour, and their willingness to blame immigrants for their 'failure' to integrate;
- The Metropolitan Police Commissioner's refusal to accept Black applicants for the Special Constabulary in the aftermath of racial disorder in 1958 and the murder of a West Indian immigrant the following year. London's first black officer was not appointed until 1967.
- Targeted policing of Black areas, which often resulted in 'well-behaved' Black men being moved along from their own neighbourhoods.

#### Notes to Editors

1. Dr James Whitfield is a visiting research fellow at the International Centre for Comparative Criminological Research at the Open University and is also a member of

the European Centre for the Study of Policing at the University. He was on duty at the 1977 Notting Hill Carnival when riot shields were deployed for the first time and retired from the Metropolitan Police at the rank of Inspector in 1999.

2. Dr Whitfield's paper, *Policing the Windrush generation*, will be published on the History and Policy website in September. To obtain a copy in advance, please contact Mel Porter, see below.
3. James Whitfield's reference to Stop and Search statistics is taken from p.23 of '*Statistics on Race and the Criminal Justice System 2005*' (Home Office, March 2006), available at: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs06/s95race05.pdf> .  
The figures did not cover stop and search under the Terrorism Act.
4. Although retired, Clarence Thompson still works with the Home Office and is actively involved in the 198 Gallery in Brixton, South London (<http://www.198gallery.co.uk/>) .  
He is the author of *Portrait of a People*, a book of poems about black life from slavery to migration and life in the 'mother country'.
5. *History and Policy* is an independent organisation campaigning for better public policy through an understanding of history. See <http://www.historyandpolicy.org/> for more details.
6. The initiative is based in the Centre for Contemporary British History, which promotes the study of the recent past, including events and issues within living memory, and sits within the Institute of Historical Research at the University of London.

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