

Background notes for input to Berlin Conference, "Banlieue Europe?" , 27/28 January 2007

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'That June' - and after

What happened...

- In summer 2001, Burnley was one of three urban areas in northern England to suffer serious social disturbances – 'the northern towns riots'.
- In each of the three towns, there were specific local 'triggers' and issues involved in the disturbances – but there were also common elements:
 - Street fighting between Asian youths and the Police;
 - Involvement, in different forms, of far right organisations;
 - Damage to property - arson attacks on buildings and cars;
 - Racist attacks by white perpetrators on Asian people and Asian owned property.

In Burnley, there was sustained street fighting between groups of white men and the Police.

Immediately after... The Task Force

- The local Council set up a 'Task Force' involving political representatives, faith leaders, young people, the Police and other organisations, and was chaired independently by Lord Tony Clarke of Hampstead.
- In Burnley, the background to the disturbances included significant social problems: poverty and social deprivation, expressed in very low wage rates, poor quality housing, the value of which had been falling, and social and racial segregation in housing and other areas of life.

Contested meanings

- June 2001 initiated a range of discourses: some complementary, others in tension with or opposition to each other.
- One meaning is to seek to use 2001 as evidence for pre-existing policy positions, or for assumptions about what lies behind 'riots' and street disturbances involving young people:

- Local mainstream politicians stated they were ‘evidence of the need for government and private sector companies to invest in housing and jobs’.
- Others emphasised the criminal nature - treating it as a law and order issue, without any explicit acknowledgement of the racial dimensions of the events, or the ways that they connected to wider social policy issues.
- Organisations and individuals on the far right asserted that the racial divisions evident in the disturbances were ‘proof’ of ‘the failure of multiculturalism’.
- A number of academics, students and political activists on the far left and in sections of the anti racist movement promoted the view that the events were ‘uprisings’ by Asian youth against racist policing – it should be said that this latter view was not voiced once in the local community meetings held as part of developing the Task Force report.

Some of the debates that took place at that time were over whether politicians’ linking the events to problems like poor housing was effectively to excuse the criminal and violent actions of ‘the rioters’.

The Birth of Community Cohesion and emergence of the BNP

- The Task Force fed into the national policy debate in the United Kingdom, co-ordinated by Ted Cantle as he developed the concept of ‘community cohesion’.
- In Burnley, organisations working for community cohesion could be in no doubt that this was a controversial area. Before the disturbances, at the British General Election in June 2001, a local man standing for the far right British National Party had taken 10 per cent of the votes cast in Burnley – just a touch below the BNP leader’s result of 11 per cent in another north west town, Oldham.
- In Oldham, the BNP had been campaigning hard for their result. In Burnley, its strong showing took the organisation itself by surprise. Concentrated campaigning contributed to the organisation winning three Council seats in May 2002 – at that time, the only political representation it had. Subsequent successes took the BNP representation in Burnley to 8 out of 45 councillors. The BNP currently hold 6 out of the 45 seats on Burnley Council. Since 2002, the BNP have followed their initial successes in Burnley by winning seats on other Councils in the North West, West Yorkshire, the Midlands and parts of London.

The Task Force Report

- The Task Force aimed to establish an account of the disturbances – what actually happened, when, and where. It was not easy to achieve consensus on this – the ‘editorial’ role of deciding what to leave in,

what to leave out, the relative priority that different moments have and the way that incidents are 'framed' and contextualised is inevitably one shaped by values and understandings of how social dynamics work.

- This account was brought together as the Task Force report - published in December 2001. This report identified several areas of public and social policy as the focus for racialised anxiety and division – education, particularly in relation to patterns of admission to secondary schools; and regeneration, especially how political and social discourse around Area Based Initiatives, in which funds and activity were focussed on particular geographical areas, had generated resentments and frustrations.
- It set out an authoritative account of what had happened – a coherent and evidenced picture that was recognised and owned by the leaders of key public agencies and leading community representatives.
- The report also looked at the way that the disturbances connected to social policy issues - the way they had been handled at local level and more widely, provided the context within which the disturbances happened and were made sense of. Moving on from the disturbances would mean addressing the social policy issues.

Catching the narrative – The Real Story

- As people reflect on the nature and meanings of events like the 2001 disturbances; as the logic of the related political and social issues work themselves out; and as social policy frameworks develop at national and local level, there is a need for key institutions which have a community leadership role to 'catch the narrative'.
- In Burnley, officers and Members of the district council, working through the Local Strategic Partnership, decided that the fifth anniversary of the disturbances, summer 2006, would be an appropriate time to pull together a 'big picture' of where the borough was in terms of community relations and race issues.
- The resulting report was launched at a conference at the end of May 2006 - a few weeks after another round of elections saw control of the council pass from the Labour Party to a joint Liberal Democrat and Conservative administration. There was overall political support for the narrative in the report across all the mainstream parties.
- 'Burnley 2006: The Real Story' received national praise and recognition for being accessible and jargon-free, and for showcasing how a town can rise to its challenges through effective dialogue between agencies and residents. 'Its language is informal, its visual style influenced - in the nicest possible way - by the tabloids,' said The Guardian. 'A story of hope' said Lord Clarke in the House of Lords, confirming his view

that the borough had raised to the challenges set out in the 2001 Task Force report.

- The report did not spend too much time looking back to 2001, but rather highlighted positive work underway to tackle major challenges, social divisions and racism in the borough; communicate positive values; and showed how agencies in the town are working practically to implement these through a range of practical activities.

A local report...

- 'Burnley 2006: The Real Story' is primarily aimed at a local audience of residents, front line public sector workers and people in the voluntary, community and faith sectors, rather than for policy makers and civil servants. This ambition to make new connections is expressed in the report's fresh tone, marked by a degree of honesty that is unusual from public bodies.
- 'Burnley 2006: The Real Story' provides a positive picture of where the town is in 2006, and is open about wanting to shape the understanding and view people have of it.
- But the report is far from being a glowing, complacent, over optimistic gloss: it bluntly acknowledges the real challenges, social problems and divisions that Burnley still faces, and recognises that many of these are expressions of deep-rooted social realities and trends; it openly acknowledges mistakes and problems, at the same time as challenging divisive myths and rumour mongering, and promoting the established policies of local agencies confidently and assertively.

What next?

- The issues and problems brought into focus by Cantle's work – such as the ongoing reality of 'parallel lives' – and the challenges identified in the cohesion agenda remain central to Burnley Council's work. They have also been taken on by other agencies and organisations in the borough, including the Police, the Local Education Authority, housing associations, and the voluntary, community and faith sector.
- The Real Story report continues to be used as a tool to increase support for positive work, through discussions at focus group meetings and within a range of organisations and residents groups. People have reacted positively to its message and its open, risk-taking character. This has helped facilitate public debate on difficult issues.
- The report is helping to redefine Burnley in the mind of its residents and partners as a town still needing to overcome a range of serious challenges and divisions, but facing up to them honestly and working effectively to sort them out.

Links to the reports and related material

Burnley Task Force report, December 2001: *Burnley Speaks: Who Listens?*

www.burnley.gov.uk/downloads/taskforcereport.pdf

Burnley Action Partnership report, May 2006: *Burnley 2006: The Real Story*

www.burnley.gov.uk/therealstory

Guardian article 'Truth and Reconciliation', 31 May 2006

<http://society.guardian.co.uk/communities/story/0,,1785958,00.html>

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