

Introduction

ON A SATURDAY afternoon in the spring of 1968 Enoch Powell gave a talk in a small upstairs room in Birmingham's Midland Hotel. In many ways the event seemed inconspicuous, with a Conservative shadow minister speaking to roughly eighty-five Tories. The speech was not directed towards these individuals alone, however. Intent on reaching a mass audience, Powell had delivered advanced transcripts to the national and local press, and the Birmingham-based company ATV sent a television crew that captured the partial clips of the speech that survive. Powell's prophecy on racial warfare and blood-foaming rivers reverberated across the country. A ferocious attack on black immigration was unleashed.

To bring this enemy to life, Powell let it be known that he had recently fallen into conversation with a constituent, a 'middle-aged, quite ordinary working man employed in one of our nationalised industries'. The man, Powell explained, was desperate to leave his own country for fear of the increasing immigrant numbers. Yet the words of this 'decent, ordinary fellow Englishman' began to blur into the words of Powell. 'In this country in 15 or 20 years time, the black man will have the whip hand over the white man' said Powell, or the man, or perhaps they had become one and the same by this point. Throughout the speech Powell presented himself as the voice of these white Wolverhampton people, speaking for and through the crafted characters of his constituency, their words now articulated in the ventriloquism of Powell's public voice. In contrast, immigrants entered the narrative as voiceless, threatening figures, removed from any sense of decency. In Wolverhampton these immigrants

had supposedly been breeding rapidly, spreading noise and confusion, breaking windows and pushing excreta through the letter boxes of white residents. The immigrant children, 'charming wide grinning piccanninies', were known to terrorise elderly white women for enjoyment; they knew no other English except the word 'racialist' which they eagerly chanted. Against the background of Martin Luther King's assassination and black risings in the United States, Powell ended with a prophecy that came to informally entitle the speech: 'As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding, like the Roman, I seem to see the River Tiber foaming with much blood.' Fusing classical imagery and the anecdotes of the nameless ordinary 'little man', the 'Rivers of Blood' speech would define Enoch Powell's career.¹

The response was immediate. Just as Powell had planned, his words secured front-page news and national attention. The following day Powell was sacked from the shadow cabinet for a speech that the Conservative leader Heath described as 'racialist in tone' and which was clearly an attempt to seize control of the party.² Support continued, however, and Powell received thousands of letters of admiration, to such an extent that the Wolverhampton sorting office was apparently unable to cope with the levels of post arriving for him.³ Meanwhile small groups of workers across the country demonstrated public support for the Conservative politician through strike action and protests. A Gallup opinion poll at the end of April suggested that 74 per cent of the British electorate agreed with Powell's sentiments as expressed in the speech, and showed that he was the favourite candidate to become the next Conservative leader.⁴ Crossman, then leader of the House of Commons, wrote in his diary on 27 April that Powell had 'stirred up the nearest thing to a mass movement since the 1930s ... Enoch is stimulating the real revolt of the masses ... he has changed the whole shape of politics overnight'.⁵ For a fleeting moment the speech seemed able to capture the support of large sections of the British population.

This book is concerned with how the industrial town of Wolverhampton was drawn into this new focus, as Powell's gaze moved from the global to the local.⁶ Powell was the MP for Wolverhampton South West and had based his speech within the anecdotal imaginings

of the town's streets, schools, buses and people. The town was presented by Powell as a microcosm of England in its ordinariness, as well as a neglected and forgotten contrast to much of the country. The research here provides a closer reading of this local focus, contributing to the literature on Powell and our understanding of race, class and resistance during a critical moment in British society. It is the purpose of this book to more seriously understand the relationship between Powell and those he claimed to represent as well as oppose.

That Powell often claimed to be speaking on behalf of his white constituents has been repeated in much of the somewhat hagiographic literature on Powell. The 'Rivers of Blood' speech is presented as the honest reporting from Powell's perspective as MP where immigration was causing 'growing concerns' within his constituency.⁷ The research here challenges this direct relationship with Powell as spokesman for the people. For one thing, the town was also represented by another two MPs, both Labour politicians who spoke out strongly against Powell's speech. Moreover, Powell's preoccupation with the local was entirely new to his politics in 1968. In his turn to a new anti-immigrant politics, Wolverhampton provided a concrete focus through which a renegotiation of race could be born, away from the global heights of Empire.

This sudden geographical turn needs further examination. The recent work of Camilla Schofield allows us to grasp this trajectory on a national and global scale, impressively situating the politics of Powell within the rise and fall of the British Empire. For Schofield, Powell was deeply touched by the lessons of Empire's end through which the black immigrant came to embody imperial decline. Yet within this argument, Powell followed a particular English path with a certain coherence to it.⁸ In contrast, this research stresses the dramatic shift in Powell's politics through which his constituency became a new concern. Paul Foot's early classic on the resistible rise of Powell is important in framing this analysis, a work that first exposed a political transformation in Powell's new focus on immigration. As decolonisation spread across the globe, Powell's politics abruptly shifted from Empire enthusiast to little Englander and for Foot, the 'Rivers of Blood' speech was marked by opportunistic hypocrisy.⁹

There has been significant new research on reformulations of race at this critical moment in British history, just as the post-war consensus began to crumble.¹⁰ This book builds on this work, examining the ways in which new economic uncertainties opened up unusual and tentative political formations for Powell. To further understand these new openings, this book investigates Powell's spatial fixation and the ways in which his words were translated into his constituency in Wolverhampton.

Discovering Wolverhampton

This local focus was not unique and, in the aftermath of the 'Rivers of Blood' speech, Wolverhampton was pulled into the national spotlight. It served as a tantalising symbol of the heart of the nation, providing a magnifying glass on subterranean national politics. The town soon found itself an attractive site for media expeditions, with numerous media accounts of Powell's constituency produced on the 'well known' racial tensions of the area. Wolverhampton came to be directly associated with Powell's anti-immigrant position within this reporting, to such an extent that it was described simply as 'Powell country' by one national journalist.¹¹ This newfound curiosity meant that journalists were suddenly concerned to hear the opinions of residents from a town that had rarely featured until then. Two weeks after the speech, for example, Wolverhampton was the subject of a national radio programme and individuals in a local pub were directly questioned on whether they would like a 'coloured man' living next to them. 'I would go raving mad' responded a local drinker.¹² A week later, Wolverhampton hosted 'a party of foreign journalists' from the Foreign Press Association to examine the reality of the 'immigration situation' in the area. Based on a six-hour tour of the town, the findings were drawn up and it was concluded that the 'colour problem' in Wolverhampton was 'hiding under a dark cloud'.¹³ The *Observer*, keen to demonstrate its knowledge of the town, went so far as to produce a visual map of where 'coloured people' lived in Wolverhampton. The coding for the map was outlined with a gradation of colours; the darker the colour the more 'coloured people' there were occupying an area of the town.¹⁴

Similarly, the *Times* became suddenly attentive to the Black Country and published a special issue on the area in 1968, spurred on by Powell's speech. One article, entitled 'Dark Question Mark', assured readers that as a rich town Wolverhampton was far from the 'grimy Black Country wilderness that it looks from a comfortable window seat'. The town could boast the largest Woolworths in Europe, and within the Mander shopping centre, a 'multi-million pound monument', even the shops were carpeted. Yet despite the economic prosperity of the town, the article concluded that 'with this continued influx from overseas there is a real fear that this part of the Black Country will become even blacker, and that the imaginative possibility exists one day of the area becoming synonymous with the American south'. The local anxiety, 'not just of the prejudiced but of the worried', was based on the assumption that the indigenous population would move out and the immigrants would move in so that 'fears of an eventual blacker and blacker Wolverhampton multiply'.¹⁵ In the 1969 BBC documentary 'Strangers in a Town', the industrial transformation of Wolverhampton was also depicted in connection with the 'problems' of immigration. The narrator explained to viewers that on the top of a hill in the middle of England lay a town of 265,000 people. The discovery of the town following Powell's speech thus produced lengthy musings on the 'odd case of Wolverhampton'.¹⁶ The town quickly became a reified symbol of the newly constructed 'colour problem', providing a curious provincial backdrop to frame the debates initiated by Powell.

Needless to say these contemporary accounts were not attentive to the complex but also overlapping relations that were developing within the town. Most evidently, the superficial reports of the town often rendered black people silent, merely a subject for others to discuss. The few times when Commonwealth immigrants are questioned and we hear their voices, it is difficult to garner any real understanding of their thoughts and feelings, since they are represented only as a burden or an outsider subject. For example, soon after the 'Rivers of Blood' speech Enoch Powell made new proposals to pay for fares 'home' for immigrants. This was reported on by Midlands News TV through a vox pop with anyone assumed to be a black immigrant stopped and interrogated on whether they would

return to their country of birth if their fare was paid by the government. The questioning, with its threatening undertones, left those singled out for the news report forced to give uncomfortable answers on the strength of their settlement in Britain. One Caribbean man responded that he was happy in Britain, but ‘if they want to get rid of me well I’ll go’.¹⁷ Such reporting framed those black interviewees not as residents with rights, but as a problem that needed to be dealt with.

Even so, these media accounts do reveal the heightened atmosphere following the speech in which black people found themselves under intense scrutiny. In this vein, accounts written by black British authors often stress the significance of the ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech as a key moment in questions of belonging, race and the nation. Stuart Hall recalled:

I had recently moved to Birmingham and will never forget the impact of the ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech. I remember the sudden, shared feeling of fear, the sense of hostility, the huddling together against the impending violence, the unspoken aggression in the streets as little groups of black men and women came together to discuss how to respond to the violence it seemed calculated to unleash. There were already reserves of resentment in places like Birmingham, Coventry and the Black Country against the post war tide of immigrants looking for jobs. Now the dyke had burst, the taboos were broken: and we felt suddenly adrift and unprotected in an alien country.¹⁸

Similarly, Mike Phillips wrote that the memory of Enoch Powell ‘will probably have me looking over my shoulder in the streets of my own city, London, for the rest of my life ... I shall always think of him as part of my history and as part of my identity’.¹⁹ This impact was felt perhaps most strongly by black people living in Wolverhampton, with recollections of feeling ‘under siege’. Vanessa Kirkpatrick was an eleven-year-old girl in the constituency of Wolverhampton North East when Powell made his ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech. ‘I can still remember vividly the fear I felt as a young black girl’ she explains. ‘I recall being unable to sleep the night that

Powell expressed his inflammatory views ... I feared going to school the next day – where I was just one of around half a dozen black pupils. Maybe it was the over active imagination of a young child, but I actually thought I might be lynched.²⁰ The polarisation which emerged following Powell's speech seemed to exist in concentrated form in Wolverhampton.

Despite this reality, black people are often written out of the speech and the town's history. A journalist sent to Wolverhampton in 1968 observed that the official handbook of the town appeared to completely ignore the presence of 'coloured people' with neither the pictorial matter nor the copy making any reference to them. The journalist noted that this was a 'peculiar situation' when Wolverhampton was home to 'fourteen and a half thousand coloured citizens' that had recently been the focus of Britain's race relations debate.²¹ This has been repeated in accounts of the town ever since. In nostalgic histories such as *Wolverhampton Memories* the photographs show only white residents. When immigration is mentioned at all it is in relation to a 'Latin love and romance' between an Italian migrant and a Wolverhampton local.²² The published photographs of Wolverhampton's history show scenes of all-white dances in the 1950s and 1960s; the absence of black people is neither noted nor explained.²³

In contrast, this book draws out a history of black people in the town that has previously been ignored, tracing the racialised divisions which had existed and were strengthened in this period. This was not a natural phenomenon but a process in which race had to be constantly made and remade. In this sense, the book reveals how particular residents within the town came to think of themselves as white or black. Yet the research also documents how, beneath the surface, new forms of living had also emerged within the town, illuminating the contradictory ways in which new immigrants lived and worked with those already residing in the town.

Methods

In examining this history, the research draws from interviews with those who lived through this speech in Wolverhampton, using interviews undertaken by the author as well as using the rich resource of the BEME

collection with black and ethnic minority residents of Wolverhampton at the start of the twenty-first century. In addition, Powell's speech transcripts, parliamentary records, national and local media reports as well as private and public archival material are all used. The newspapers, in particular, were significant in the story of Powell's speech, with Powell intent on achieving maximum media coverage. Powell had already made a speech in Walsall in February of 1968 with all of the same themes of his 'Rivers of Blood' speech yet it had received little attention. Powell's April speech in Birmingham was, in this respect, a huge success. By Sunday it was the lead story in every newspaper.²⁴

Of course, media reports were by no means neutral and while readers were not simply 'subject' to media reporting, the newspaper played an important, albeit critically absorbed, role in framing the speech. As early as 1870, Marx noted that the racial antagonisms between Irish and English workers were kept artificially alive and intensified by the press.²⁵ Du Bois too wrote of the Jim Crow era in the American South and the role of newspapers in specialising in reports that flattered poor whites while almost utterly ignoring black people except in stories of crime and as objects of ridicule.²⁶ Engaging with material realities and everyday experiences, newspapers can name, map and define a town in specific ways.²⁷

The two local papers in Wolverhampton, the daily *Express and Star* and the weekly *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, were no different in this respect. With an average daily circulation of roughly a quarter of a million throughout the 1960s, the *Express and Star* was crucial in forming and articulating a racialised 'local community', providing a sense of familiarity with the area and an expression of a known, Wolverhampton identity.²⁸ During the 'Rivers of Blood' speech, the *Express and Star* seized the opportunity to report on the issue locally with extensive coverage in the weeks that followed. The day after the speech, the front page was simply a reprint of Powell's words, with a call for readers to write in to the paper to show either support or opposition, and thousands of local readers responded with overwhelming support for Powell's speech.²⁹ This editorial framing was also highly contested. A week after the speech a demonstration was organised against Powell by local students from the Wulfrun College of

Further Education, as well as the Wolverhampton Technical Teachers College. The *Express and Star* offices became a key site within the protest route. A letter delivered to the newspaper read: ‘we protest at the role of your newspaper in encouraging the expression of racial prejudice now rife in this town. Since the time that immigrants arrived in this town you have used news items in such a way as to present immigrants in the worst light.’ During the week of the speech, the protestors argued the newspaper had ‘acted with almost criminal irresponsibility in conducting a ballot which invited every racially prejudiced person in the area to make clear their racial prejudice’. The letter was signed from ‘the workers, students and immigrants of Wolverhampton’.³⁰ Similarly, following local council elections in the area soon after the speech a defeated candidate, ex Labour councillor Arthur Morey of Wednesfield North West, criticised the newspaper for ‘playing up’ the immigration issue night after night. ‘Without the aid of the *Express and Star* this election would have been completely different’ he argued.³¹ Much of the literature on Powell portrays the then editor of the local newspaper as something of a hero, standing up for his own editorial principles against the racist tone of Powell’s speech. The editor maintained a close friendship with Powell up until the delivery of the speech and provided extensive media advice on achieving the utmost coverage, advice which was clearly heeded by the MP.³² Following the national reaction to the speech, the editorial supported Heath’s sacking of Powell from the shadow cabinet, and agreed that the tone of the speech had been ‘unnecessarily extravagant’, but they also argued that for too long there had been a neglect from those in authority to the ‘problems’ of immigration, with the notable exception of their own newspaper.³³ Indeed, Powell’s new intervention was described acerbically as his ‘quite belated emergence in the Messianic role’.³⁴ Instead of an intrepid outburst from Powell, key parts of his speech had already emerged within the local paper.

The local newspapers are thus an important resource within this research but were not neutral bystanders. The contemporary sources drawn from in this book frequently reveal – sometimes inadvertently and sometimes explicitly – racial prejudices that were dominant at the time. This is particularly obvious with the common use of the term ‘coloured’

to refer to black people. This book uses this term only when quoting these sources and for the rest of the book instead uses the political terminology of black to describe those with heritage from the Caribbean and Indian subcontinent.

Chapter 1 of this book explores these black experiences in Britain and how they related to dramatic global changes as well as national shifts in relation to race, class and resistance. Enoch Powell and his 'Rivers of Blood' speech are situated within the reverberations of 1968, and the chapter examines the ways in which common global underlying processes expressed themselves in very different national forms. Just as global protests were spreading, Powell displayed a newfound concern with his local constituency. Chapter 2 argues that beneath the surface, however, more complex dynamics existed in Wolverhampton in which race was both a real force and also undermined by everyday relations. These tensions are further discussed through a longer history of the town. Chapter 3 centres on the immediate impact of the speech in both national and local settings and interrogates the opposing responses Powell's words provoked. Chapter 4 focuses on everyday resistance to racism that was simmering within the town, examining social relations on both the local buses and in the schools. Powell drew these two disputes into a national debate as a way of strengthening racial divisions. Yet the resistance on the buses and in the schools also highlighted an emerging anti-racist movement that, while still unorganised in this period, would begin to develop into an explicit opposition in the years that followed. Finally, in chapter 5 the memories of Powell and his speech are examined. This chapter looks at the ways in which the speech has since been remembered, by powerful forces on a national scale as well as more local responses within the multicultural city of Wolverhampton. The shadow of Powell remains significant within British politics. Yet it is a shadow which exists within particular boundaries and there is a continual battle over Powell's legacy. A rooted anti-racist tradition has restrained a direct and open rehabilitation of the politician.

This book is therefore about Powell and his speech, but more importantly it is about the agency of ordinary people, both black and white, who were suddenly thrown into a national debate and responded in different

ways. Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech broke through an oscillation between the visible and the hidden that had been building throughout the decade. The national words of this Conservative figure revealed a racism that had already existed on a local scale, yet was now given new form to enable its survival within a rapidly changing Britain. As Britain's empire began to crumble, the industrial town of Wolverhampton found itself the site through which a new 'immigrant' enemy was both defined and targeted. The resistance to Powell's words in 1968 was a minority action, and yet it would lay the foundations in which, over the next decade, a multiracial working class was forged through anti-racist movements.³⁵ To understand these convulsions, it is to this revolutionary year of 1968 that the book now turns.