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The 'Scots porridge case' of 1969 : Bogus discrimination, the Loony State and the White

Backlash Archive ¹

Olivier Esteves

Key-words : Scotland, Britain, anti-discrimination legislations, White Backlash, Race Relations Board, nativism, 1960s-1970s, memory.

Summary : In November 1969, a quite odd and ludicrous case of alleged discrimination was blown out of all proportions, perhaps wilfully, by conservative politicians and the media in Britain, some eighteen months after Enoch Powell's Birmingham speech. A quite high-profile issue at the time, the case has now been completely forgotten. Yet, this article suggests that the event itself is helpful to make better sense of the *British* -rather than merely English- ramifications of debates on race relations and discrimination, this at a time of Scottish nationalist upsurge. More importantly, the case partakes of what I call here the 'White Backlash' archive, a populist and popular repertoire that nativists not only in Britain draw from in order to underline that the State is inefficient and counter-productive when it tries to legislate against discrimination, and that ethnic minorities and immigrants get undue protection from the state authorities, although the 1969 case itself had nothing to do with ethnic minorities or immigration.

On August 16th 1969, one Alfred Emslie, a Scottish heart consultant living in Eastbourne (East Sussex) with his Scottish wife published what he then deemed to be an innocuous enough advert in the Eastbourne Herald. This was asking for a 'Scottish daily for Scottish family.' The reason for such Caledonian restrictiveness was that the Belgian au-pair working for the family, one

I wish to thank Laura Carter (Université de Paris), Timothy Peace (University of Glasgow), Lindsay Paterson (University of Edinburgh) for their meticulous reading of this article.

Nora Van Loovens, proved unable to cook proper Scottish porridge, which she did not in the least take seriously, claiming : ‘it was only something we joked about at school when we talked of the English and their big breakfast which made them so fat.’² Balking at the prospect of instant-made porridge, the Aberdeen-born doctor and his Highland wife published the advert.

Little did they know that a mass media³ storm would follow in the next few months. A complaint was issued to the Race Relations Board (R.R.B.), for the advert contravened section 6 (‘Advertisements and Notices’) of the Race Relations Act of 1968.⁴ Had Alfred Emslie asked for a person able to cook ‘Scottish porridge’, he would not have run afoul of the law. But in the present case his request was unlawful. Hiring someone of your own racial, ethnic or national group was not discriminatory in itself especially for household employees (sections 7 and 8 of the 1968 law), but advertising for this was illegal.⁵

The ‘Scots porridge gate’ has elicited very scant academic attention. In a 1970 *Political Quarterly* piece, Nicholas Deakin and Jenny Bourne passingly refer to it as ‘the frankly absurd episode of the Scottish doctor whose housekeeper’s porridge made endless headlines in the silly season of 1969.’⁶ Bob Hepple also touches upon it in his *Race, Jobs and the law in Britain* (second edition published in 1970),⁷ as well as Anthony Lester and Geoffrey Bindman in *Race and Law* (published in 1972), with both concluding that ‘the significance of the case appears slight.’⁸

2 *The Guardian*, ‘Storm in a Porridge Bowl’, 20. Nov. 1969.

3 Back in 1968-9, ‘mass media’ started to be increasingly used, instead of ‘the press’; ‘the media’ was not used yet.

4 This states : ‘(1)It shall be unlawful for any person to publish or display, or to cause to be published or displayed, any advertisement or notice which indicates, or which could reasonably be understood as indicating, an intention to do an act of discrimination, whether or not it would be unlawful by virtue of any other provision of this Act ; (2)Subsection (1) above shall not render unlawful the publication or display, or causing the publication or display, of an advertisement or notice which indicates that Commonwealth citizens or any class of such citizens are required for employment outside Great Britain or that persons other than such citizens are required for employment in Great Britain.’

5 See Erik Bleich, *The Freedom to be Racist ? How The United States and Europe Struggle to Preserve Freedom and Combat Racism* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2011), 121-2.

6 Nicolas Deakin, Jenny Bourne, “Powell, the Minorities and the 1970 elections”, *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 41, no. 4, 1970, 399-415 (401).

7 (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1970), 103-4

8 (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1972), 196-7.

My contention in this article is that the whole affair was only *seemingly* negligible. Indeed, the controversy is historically significant for three major reasons. First, one and a half year after Enoch Powell's so-called 'Rivers of Blood' speech in Birmingham (20. 04. 1968) the case provided hefty rhetorical fodder to opponents of anti-discrimination legislation. It delineated the contours of a supposedly 'loony State' meddling in ordinary Britons' daily lives and cherished freedoms. Second, because it involved a Scottish couple living in England the Scots porridge affair of 1969 sheds some interesting, albeit oblique, light on the question of 'race relations' north of the border, as well as on the evolution of Britain as a multinational polity. Thirdly, the affair itself belongs firmly in what I refer to as the 'white backlash archive', from which radical-right populists have drawn in their efforts to expose what some Enoch Powell supporters in the late 1960s vilified as the 'multiracial Gestapo', and since around 2000 have been known as 'the PC police'.⁹ What is broadly meant by 'white backlash archive' is a set of cross-generational narratives which entrenches the view that 'whites' are the victims of reverse discrimination (a phrase actually used by Powell in his speech in the same town of Eastbourne exactly one year before the Scots porridge case),¹⁰ that the State curtails the hard-earned freedoms of taxpayers construed as whites in order to benefit groups stigmatised as alien, undeserving, at worst parasitic. Therefore, beyond the debate on the legal intricacies of the case, which have already been explored by Hepple, Lester and Bindman and were also hotly debated in the Commons in 1969, it is really the genesis, crystallization and memorialization of the 'white backlash talk' around the affair that I wish to interrogate here. As such then, this article is a contribution to the general historiography on the cultural dimensions of the radical right in Britain,¹¹ with some international ramifications more recently explored under the umbrella term of 'global white nationalism.'¹²

9 On the late 1960s situation, see Olivier Esteves, *Inside the Black Box of 'White Backlash', Letters of Support to Enoch Powell (1968-9)*, forthcoming ; Hillary Pilkington, *Loud and Proud, Passion and Politics in the English Defence League* (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2016), 109, 119, 208 ; Steve Garner, *A Moral Economy of Whiteness : Four Frames of Racializing Discourse* (Abingdon : Routledge, 2015), 60

10 In it he refers to the 'fact of reverse discrimination – that it is not the immigrant but the Briton who feels himself the 'toad beneath the harrow' in the areas where the immigrant population is spreading and taking root'. The whole speech is available at : <https://enochpowell.net/fr-83.html>

11 Particularly Bill Schwarz, *The White Man's World, Vol. 1 : Memories of Empire* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2011) ; Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Post-colonial Britain* (Cambridge : Cambridge

A racial mountain out of a Scottish molehill

In this section is presented the succession of events since the publication of the advert in the *Eastbourne Herald*. All in all, three months elapsed between this and the press revelation of the case. First, an anonymous complaint was issued to the R.R.B. Mr. Emslie was duly notified by mail, and contacted a reputable firm of solicitors locally, which informed the conservative M.P. for Eastbourne, Sir Charles Taylor. Taylor then made public the letter he had received, exclaiming : ‘I would have thought it was a joke if it had not been sent to me by an established solicitor.’¹³ The Scottish heart consultant made it clear that ‘there was nothing racial about it. We are Scots people and it’s quite natural that you should like Scots people around you, especially if they can cook the food you like’.¹⁴ He then went on to expose what he saw as the R.R.B’s asinine move : ‘A responsible committee like the one that dealt with this should be able to discriminate between the jocular or frivolous and the serious cases’.¹⁵

The early steps of the case are shrouded in mystery : the identity and the motivations of the original complainant are not known, Dr Emslie has not left archives available to the public and nor has Charles Taylor, despite his political responsibilities.¹⁶ Therefore, what communication there was between Dr Emslie and Charles Taylor is a matter of conjecture. What *is* known is that Taylor was a staunch opponent of the Race Relations Bill in the heated debates of Spring 1968. He had some strong business interests, and had been President of Grosvenor House (Park Lane) Ltd, Residential Hotels Association since 1946. His reluctance to accept the introduction of anti-

University Press, 2013) ; Stuart Ward (ed.), *British Culture and the End of Empire* (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2001).

12 Daniel Geary, Camilla Schofield, Jennifer Sutton (eds.), *Global White Nationalism : From Apartheid to Trump* (Manchester : Manchester University Press, 2020).

13 *The Guardian*, ‘Race Issue Scotched’, 19. 11. 1969.

14 *The Daily Mirror*, 20. 11. 1969.

15 *Ibid*.

16 Regrettably, ‘The Keep’ (East Sussex Record Office, based in Brighton) and the Bodleian conservative party archives at Oxford do not hold anything for Charles Taylor.

discrimination legislation chimed with many corporate interests, according to which the freedom to hire whomever they wanted on the job market could hardly be curtailed by the State, and broadly thwarted economic efficiency. In the Commons he spoke in favour of 'the British Hotels and Restaurants Association' which he defended against the busibodies of the Race Relations Board.¹⁷

Although silent during the 1968 Race Relations Bill debate in the Commons, Charles Taylor was quite vocal eighteen months later during the Scots porridge case. His statements both exposed the legislation itself (in his view 'a silly act')¹⁸ as well as the bureaucrats whose job it was to implement it, whom he dismissed as 'all these rather pompous, idiotic asses' that really 'should be removed'.¹⁹ His confidence in making such points was no doubt bolstered by the hundreds of letters he received after publicizing the case.²⁰

The reason why Taylor expressed disagreement with the act itself cohered with the opposition of most other reluctant conservatives. As Taylor said himself in the Commons, 'We cannot legislate for people's consciences.'²¹ A view which Enoch Powell, Duncan Sandys and Ronald Bell whole-heartedly endorsed.²² In her political biography of Powell, Camilla Schofield draws an apposite parallel between the Wolverhampton M.P. and conservative philosopher Maurice Cowling, both of whom stressed how liberalism could not rightly assume that man's soul was perfectible, and that therefore it was wrong for the State to try to fight against evils such as racism and racial stereotypes.²³ Taylor no doubt agreed with this, and this theoretical positioning found a pragmatic expression in the hotels he was running : free trade, in a sense, had to mean freedom from State encroachment in hiring practices. This also reflected the fact that up to 1968 the courts were

17 Hansard, *House of Commons debates*, 16 December 1969, vol 793, c 1312.

18 *Ibid*, c 1317.

19 *Ibid.*, c 1312.

20 *Ibid.*, c 1313.

21 Hansard, *House of Commons debates*, 06 February 1970, vol 795, c 880.

22 See Schofield, 213.

23 *Ibid*, 236.

bound by Common law which, according to Lester and Bindman, 'does not frown upon racial discrimination.'²⁴

Taylor's decision to go public about the Scots porridge case may therefore have been strategically designed to dent public confidence in legislation -the Race Relations Act of 1968- that had been passed the previous year. In order to achieve this task, both the affair itself and the timing were ideal. There were several key ingredients to make the Scots porridge case the very stuff that headlines are made of : a dose of the ludicrous combined with powerful injustice frames, a strong anti-bureaucracy and anti-Statist dimension, a quaintness inherent in several details about the Emslie house (replete with references to 'kilts, tartans, broth and shortbread'²⁵), also the fact that the most unlikely person -a Scottish doctor- was being targetted about the most unlikely thing in the most unlikely of places. Eastbourne was indeed a privileged site for ex-colonial families,²⁶ a seaside resort in a county (East Sussex) where 93.61 % of the population had been born in Britain according to the 1966 census.²⁷ From the standpoint of Eastbourne, therefore, 'race relations' and 'racial discrimination' were something which was conceivably assumed to be taking place 'out there' in London's Notting Hill or Birmingham's Handsworth. Again, it bears repeating that it was in such a place that Enoch Powell delivered another speech on immigration on November 16th of 1968, at the invitation of the local Rotary Club.

Unsurprisingly, papers in their coverage vied for the catchiest, oddest titles. Here is a non-exhaustive selection : 'A Fly in the Porridge', 'The Scots porridge row boils over', 'Cooking Up a Case of Race', 'Storm in a Porridge Bowl', 'Race Issue Scotched', 'Great Scot ! It's racial'.²⁸

24 Lester & Bindman, 28.

25 *The Birmingham Daily Post*, 20. 11. 1969.

26 Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families : Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2004), 227-8.

27 This, admittedly, was congruent with all other British counties outside the London conurbation, where the percentage of 'born in Britain' was always above 90 %. Among the 20 localities with the highest concentrations of New Commonwealth (non-white) immigrants, 16 were in London, 2 in Birmingham, and one in Bradford and Manchester.

28 Respectively *Daily Mirror*, 21. 11. 1969 ; *Daily Mail*, 20. 11. 1969 ; *Financial Times*, 19. 11. 1969 ; *The Guardian*, 21. 11. 1969 ; *The Guardian*, 20. 11. 1969 ; *The Daily Express*, 21. 11. 1969.

A Reuters dispatch made the news international, and Anglophone newspapers across the world joined the bandwagon : from *The New York Times* ('Oatmeal Brings a Charge of Bias') to *The Sydney Morning Herald* ('Law Gets in a Mess of Porridge') as well as the *Vancouver Sun* bemoaning in braid Scots : 'Scots' Home no Longer His Ain'. From Apartheid South-Africa, the *Johannesburg Star* joked : " 'Scottish' was discrimination, so Doctor had 'Belgian' instead".²⁹ As was to be expected as well, cartoonists were quick to expose the ludicrousness of the situation, from *News of the World* to *Daily Mail*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Evening News* (see **illustrations 1, 2 and 3**). Unquestionably, all of these partook in the 'miscellanification' of news coverage,³⁰ a tendency particularly at play in the tabloid press and exacerbated through specific questions, such as race relations and immigration, as will be argued below.

It was all the more so in the present case as the Scots porridge affair was no sooner revealed than actually terminated, with the Race Relations Board underlining that they did not wish to bring the case any further. Literally therefore, an actual issue making headlines and front page news was made out of a non-issue. On November 20th 1969 a *Times* opinion column announced that "the Race Relations Board are not contemplating any action against him".³¹ Therefore what caused a stir in the mass media was not prosecution but the fact that Dr Emslie had just been notified of the unlawfulness of his advert. This sole event was exploited by some conservatives, in an effort to weaken public trust in a new piece of legislation and in a bureaucracy that clearly rested upon public trust to be efficient and promote 'racial harmony'.

Denting the credibility of a new bureaucracy

29 Respectively 23. 11. 1969 ; 21. 11. 1969 ; 19. 11. 1969 ; 01. 12. 1969.

30 In France, Gérard Noiriel has talked about 'fait-diversisation de l'actualité' in the same fields. 'Miscellanification' is an attempt at a translation into English. See Gérard Noiriel, *Immigration, antisémitisme et racisme en France, XIXème-Xxème siècles : discours publics, humiliations privées* (Paris : Fayard, 2007), 98-101.

31 *The Times*, 'No Scot : By Order', 20. 11. 1969.

The first Race Relations Act was voted in 1965, in Erik Bleich's words "a whimper of a law".³² Largely conciliatory, the legislation aimed to ban racial discrimination in public places as well as the promotion of hatred on the grounds of "colour, race, or ethnic or national origins".³³ Housing and employment were outside the remit of the law. Despite its structural weaknesses, it was quite commendable in so far as it provided a template for future institutions, debates and policies. Some behind-the-scenes negotiations in fact reflected this perfectibility : Mark Bonham Carter had accepted to chair the newly-created Race Relations Board only on the basis that the weak Race Relations Act (1965) be given more teeth in the short term (about a year).³⁴

Bonham Carter worked with a board of directors including Sir Roy Wilson, President of the Industrial Court since 1961, Mr. Leslie Blakeman, Director of Labour Relations of the Ford Motor Company, and Lord Constantine, the former West-Indian cricket player and friend of C. L. R. James. The Board comprised some regional conciliation committees covering England, Scotland and Wales, with 16 'race professionals'³⁵ altogether, headed by John Lyttle. By far the busiest of these was the South-Metropolitan committee, with Peter Pain (QC) at its helm. It included the London conurbation, Kent and Sussex, and therefore Eastbourne.

The above-mentioned 'miscellanification' fuelled a kind of 'circular circulation'³⁶ of news coverage magnifying the importance of some dysfunctional, anecdotal detail, thereby obfuscating any thorough appraisal of the bigger picture. In Bonham Carter's eyes, 'It is characteristic of the mass media that this complaint got more publicity than the 800 others we have dealt with'.³⁷ Ultimately, dysfunctional developments, however anecdotal, were bound to make

32 Erik Bleich, *Race Politics in Britain and France : Ideas and Policy-Making since the 1960s* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2003), 61.

33 For a general presentation of the act, see Bob Hepple, 'The Race Relations Act 1965', *The Modern Law Review*, Vol. 29, No. 3, 1966, 306-314.

34 E. J. B. Rose (ed.), *Colour and Citizenship : Report on British Race Relations* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1969), 520.

35 The phrase is used in *Ibid.*, 519.

36 The phrase is used in Pierre Bourdieu, *Sur la Télévision* (Paris : Seuil / Liber, 1996), 17.

37 Quoted in *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, 20. 11. 1969.

ethnic minorities and immigrants even more on the defensive. Although non-white immigrants had nothing empirically to do with the issue, they could nevertheless feel singled out since Dr Emslie's mishap actually or potentially smacked of 'unfairness to whites', as even the moderate *Glasgow Herald* underlined: 'How would the South Metropolitan Conciliation Committee have regarded an advertisement for an Indian daily from a family with a well-developed taste for curries?'³⁸ One and a half year after Powell's rhetorical detonation, the case was likely to exacerbate anew the non-white immigrants' low-profile, many of whom were, in Stuart Hall's words, "tiptoeing through the tulips"³⁹ in Britain.

Laying stress on the Scots porridge case as evidence of a wrong-headed legislation made it harder to appreciate the real, major improvements that had taken place since 1968. As *The Guardian* duly noted, 'it is surely worth making a mess of porridge if that is the price for disposing finally of those offensive 'no coloureds' advertisements which used to litter newsagents' windows'.⁴⁰ Papers such as *The Times* and *Daily Mirror* did not argue otherwise. It is undeniable that the law almost put an abrupt end to such adverts, for by and large Britons took a legalist approach on the question. The point was made here by David Sieff, chairman of the North Metropolitan conciliation committee to the Race Relations Board: 'Once a thing is law, then it is a law and the great mass of the people are prepared to accept it.'⁴¹

Nevertheless, emotional responses equating the law to how grossly unfair Dr Emslie's treatment was could potentially overshadow the real improvements, and thus dent public confidence in a bureaucracy and legislation that were quite new, as again much of the moderate press was prompt to point out, *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *Financial Times*, etc.⁴² This was all the more so as

38 *Glasgow Herald*, 'Daily Help Farce', 19. 11. 1969.

39 Stuart Hall, 'Racism and reaction' in *Selected Political Writings: The Great Moving Right Show and Other Essays* (Duke University Press, 2016 [1976]), 147.

40 *The Guardian*, 'One Candle for the Race Act', 26. 11. 1969.

41 *The Times*, 'How Race Law is Misunderstood', 21. 11. 1969.

42 See *The Times*, 'No Scots, by Order', 20. 11. 1969; *The Times*, 'Progress and Promise', 26. 11. 1969;

the very weakness of the legislation and of the Race Relations Board made public confidence even more of an imperious necessity to promote better 'race-relations', as Ann Dummett argued.⁴³

Much of the weakness discussed here was because of the magnitude of the political and rhetorical tsunami that had shaken Britain one year before, in the wake of Enoch Powell's 'Birmingham speech'.⁴⁴ The Wolverhampton MP's colossal postbag provides hefty evidence of a large legal and moral panic about the Race Relations Bill being discussed in Parliament.⁴⁵ From a sample of 9 600 letters in support of Powell, only one actually took the view that the law would inevitably lack teeth. A constituent from Tooting (London borough of Wandsworth) in a letter displaying detailed knowledge of immigration and integration questions stressed that the new legislation would probably be "at once so difficult to enforce and so open to abuse". Among all the letters sent, the man was also the only one to actually refer to the "Race Relations Board" whose toothlessness he exposed.⁴⁶ By and large though, the recurrence of wrathful attacks against the 1968 Race Relations Bill is staggering in Powell's postbag. One woman from cozy Milford-On-Sea (Hampshire) wrote : "we are not prosecuted for saying that the Scots get drunk on New Years Eve but we are liable for prosecution if we say that coloureds push excreta through the letter box of an old age pensioner. Yet both are facts".⁴⁷ Powell supporters were also prompt to expose the insidious penetration of the British "GESTAPO State"⁴⁸ led by "our self-styled dictator Mr Wilson".⁴⁹ In so doing they sometimes referred to the actual or virtual illegality of their epistolary offerings to Powell : "I suppose in a short time this letter might be illegal...." (Man, Farnborough (Hampshire)). Another man from Staines (Middlesex) wrote : "P.S : it just shows how people's minds are

43 Ann Dummett, 'What to do', *Race Today*, Vol 1, no. 3, July 1969 ; Michael Hill, Ruth Issacharoff, *Community action and race relations : a study of community relations committees in Britain* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1971), 177-8.

44 On the preferability of calling it 'Birmingham speech' rather than 'Rivers of Blood' speech, see Olivier Esteves, Stéphane Porion (eds.), *The Lives and Afterlives of Enoch Powell, The Undying Animal* (Abingdon : Routledge, 2019), 1-2, 177.

45 See Olivier Esteves, *Inside the 'Black Box' of White Backlash : Letters of Support to Enoch Powell*, forthcoming in 2022.

46 Staffordshire Record Office [hereafter SRO], Powell Papers [hereafter PP], D3123/333.

47 SRO, PP, D3123/10.

48 SRO, PP, D3123/50.

49 SRO, PP, D3123/35 (Man, Cowplain (Hampshire)).

beginning to work, my wife after reading my letter to Mr. Heath said, ‘there’s nothing they can have you up for, is there ?’ ” (Man, Staines (Middlesex)). Another one cried out : “*Being British* I must remain anonymous !” (Man, Dagenham (Essex)).⁵⁰

What is key through many of these epistolary outpourings is that the Scots porridge case that erupted one year later unleashed a chorus of ‘I told you so !’ not only among those Powell supporters but to some extent beyond. Anticipated by those self-styled common-sense Britons who were spurred by Powell’s fiery rhetoric about the old lady who gets excreta into her letter-box and is ‘afraid to go to jail’, the Eastbourne event confirmed in the same people’s eyes that a loony left could only produce a loony State, bent upon protecting everyone’s liberty except the ‘true’ Britishers. It may even be said that 1968 had its very famous expiatory victim of the ‘race relations industry’ in the person of this anonymous elderly lady, who ended up being identified decades later through research into Powell’s archives.⁵¹ And that in 1969 another expiatory victim was Dr Emslie, whose tribulations never actually rose to posterity but were actively exploited nonetheless. Albeit from discrete social classes, both were projected as elderly, law-abiding, tax-paying, deserving whites, the very political fodder that the radical-right is quite keen to utilize rhetorically. One was English, the other one Scottish, and the next section interrogates the Caledonian dimension of this affair.

The Break-Up of Britain over Scottish porridge ?

Another facet of this issue was indeed its Scottish dimension, at a time when, as Husbands or Miles and Muirhead have argued,⁵² it was still overwhelmingly believed that ‘race relations’ was an English specificity within the UK polity. This was true despite the sizable

50 Respectively SRO, PP, D3123/55 ; SRO, PP, D3123/15 ; SRO, PP, D3123/16.

51 The woman was one Druscilla Cotterill, 61 years old, who lived in the heart of Powell’s constituency. See Olivier Esteves, Stéphane Porion (eds.), *The Afterlives*, p. 56.

52 Charles Husband, *Race in Britain : Continuity and Change* (London : Hutchinson, 1982), 279 ; Robert Miles, Leslie Muirhead, ‘Racism in Scotland : a Matter for Further Investigation’, *Scottish Government Yearbook*, 1986, 108.

Pakistani community in the Glasgow conurbation.⁵³ In fact, although more than 95 % of the letters of support to Powell were sent from England, the few Scottish opinions that were put on paper do prove heuristic, if only as illustrations that Scotland was seen as potentially menaced by multiraciality. A woman from Stirling acknowledged that “People in places such as Scotland do not realise how the problem has built up” but having lived in Smethwick, Notting Hill and just next to Liverpool’s historic Chinatown, she claims she is cognizant of the issue of nonwhite immigration and is deeply concerned about the future.⁵⁴ Likewise, a man from Ballater in Aberdeenshire warned : “This is not a Scottish problem, yet, but we do not wish our grandchildren to have a black nation on our southern border”.⁵⁵

It is a fact, then, that Powell’s radical right campaign reverberated throughout Britain, and so did, albeit to a much lesser extent, the Scots porridge case of 1969. As a multinational polity, the UK was sometimes vilified north of the border for not providing decent welfare assistance to British natives whilst, it was claimed, ladling out help to undeserving immigrants. In Powell’s postbag, welfare chauvinist gut reactions are extremely recurrent, with immigrants routinely being stigmatised as ‘welfare parasites’. Sometimes, although quite rarely, perceptions of welfare abuse by immigrants in London or Birmingham were depicted as detrimental to people of Scotland, such as here with this Glaswegian man :

I live with my mother in an old tenement building and have no hope of a council house in Glasgow although my mother is crippled with arthritis and is unable to get down the three flights of stairs. Should this bill be passed a coloured person arriving in this country only five years ago will be entitled to a council house if they have the necessary number of children, having contributed very little to the country in rates or taxes and I am meant to hold no hatred for people like that.⁵⁶

53 Bashir Maan, Bruce Millan, *The New Scots: The Story of Asians in Scotland* (Edinburgh : John Donald Publishers, 2001) ; Ali Wardak, *Social Control and Deviance : a South-Asian Community in Scotland* (Aldershot : Ashgate, 2000).

54 SRO, PP, D3123/55.

55 SRO, PP, D3123/85.

56 SRO, PP, D3123/25.

To sum up then, Scotland still saw itself as sheltered from non-white immigration but some Scots believed the British State, in terms of perceived unfair welfare provision and anti-discrimination schemes, impacted their lives negatively. The Scots porridge case of 1969 would only exacerbate the feeling among those Britons. Three Scottish conservative Members of Parliament noted ‘with astonishment’ that Dr Emslie had published a discriminatory advert in the Eastbourne press. Another case in Irvine (Ayrshire) was revealed, with the Irvine Development Corporation advertising for a ‘Scottish lawyer’, understood in the sense of a lawyer practicing Scots law (different from English law). The Scottish reference had to be deleted because of section 6 to the Race Relations Act.⁵⁷

In the press as well as in the parliamentary archives, there are repeated signs of Scottish touchiness over the whole affair, this exactly two years after Winifred Ewing had been elected MP for the SNP in the constituency of Hamilton. Ewing herself reacted to the Eastbourne case by trying to calm down passions : ‘The advertiser was probably after the good Scottish broth that Scottishwomen can make.’⁵⁸ Other Scots at Westminster begged to differ. Donald Dewar warned about the ‘danger of racial intolerance spreading in Scotland’ for ‘some of the people who had shouted loudly about Eastbourne were now showing a strange touchiness.’⁵⁹ It is hard to tell whether Dewar was merely depicting this touchiness or actually stoking it performatively. In the Commons, when asked whether Scots were not ‘really making an awful fuss about the whole thing?’, he retorted : ‘No, they're not, but they think it is another example of the way in which they're forgotten or neglected. I mean, the *Race Relations Act* appears to them to have been badly drafted, and if this is a matter which say it affected the whole of England it would have been better drafted; they may be right or wrong, they think it is another example of the way Scotland is treated.’ Jo Grimond, MP for Orkney and Shetland, who tried unsuccessfully to amend the Race Relations Act to bolster public confidence in it, was convinced that the case had touched a very sensitive

⁵⁷ *The Glasgow Herald*, ‘More Race Trouble Involving Scots’, 20. 11. 1969.

⁵⁸ *The Glasgow Herald*, ‘Editorial’, 19. 11. 1969.

⁵⁹ *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, ‘Danger of Race Intolerance’, 07. 02. 1970.

nerve in Scotland : ‘We in Scotland do not regard ourselves as a racial minority, to which the Act was intended to apply. But from time to time we feel that Acts are passed in the British Parliament without possibly taking into full account how they would fit in the Scottish case.’ This whetted ‘a kind of touchy patriotism which on occasions gets a little out of hand’.⁶⁰

However anecdotal in appearance, the Scots porridge case of 1969 did raise some important issues in terms of Scotland’s place within the UK as a multinational polity. First, it challenged the self-proclaimed Scottish immunity from race relations issues. Albeit in minor mode, it also forced some Scots to wonder about their position *vis-à-vis* the state provision of protection from discrimination, a differentialist approach aimed at identifiable minorities. In post-colonial times, now that no fruits could be reaped from the Empire,⁶¹ Scotland was growingly regarding itself as a submerged nation within the UK, and yet in this porridge matter it was told that it could only be among the discriminators, not the discriminated against. Besides, and although the legislation’s remit was about discrimination ‘on the ground of colour, race or ethnic or national origins’, part of the debate was also about whether Scots differed from the English or Welsh on the basis of race, nationality or ethnicity, a point which was raised by the press and in the Commons.⁶²

Lastly, the affair proved ideal for the deployment of different forms of nostalgia, from the harmless, reflexive, ‘there goes the neighbourhood’ form to the more populist, revanchist type targetting ethnic minorities, immigrants, bureaucrats, ‘England’, etc.⁶³ The reason for this lay in the identity and projected lifestyles of the Emslies, an elderly couple who were only trying to preserve timeless culinary traditions such as old-style porridge dismissed as ‘discriminatory’ when supermarket chains were fast changing British daily habits (‘instant porridge’) and British

60 *Aberdeen Evening Press*, 06. 02. 1970.

61 Thomas Devine, *Scotland’s Empire : The Origins of the Global Diaspora* (London : Penguin, 2012).

62 See *Newcastle Journal*, 24. 11. 1969 ; see also statement by Tom Driberg (MP for Barking), Hansard, *House of Commons debates*, 16 December 1969, vol 793, c 1312.

63 On restorative and reflexive nostalgia, see Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York : Basic Books, 2001), 41-9. On nostalgic deprivation, see Justin Gest, Tyle Reny, Jeremy Mayer, ‘Roots of the ‘Radical Right : Nostalgic Deprivation in the United States and Britain’, *Comparative Political Studies*, 2017, 18.

permissive society was letting both Tariq Ali insult the country on TV and Mick Jagger use drugs. The case, in a sense, was a bureaucratic assault on traditional ordinariness, an ordinariness construed as white, Scottish, respectable, meritocratic.⁶⁴

The White Backlash archive

I wish here to study the Scots porridge case of 1969 as an integral part of the British, and to some extent global, white backlash archive. This archive consists of a complex skein of micro-narratives, gossip,⁶⁵ homosocial jokes,⁶⁶ indignant anecdotes, stories replete with revanchist nostalgia. The white backlash archive reinforces the in-group, cross-class cohesiveness of British natives in times of systemic identity crisis. The reasons for this crisis are well-known: the accelerating pace of deindustrialisation (even before the oil shock of 1973) and as a corollary the fading of British working-class culture, the decline of the economy and of the nation as a whole, the demise of Empire, etc. As is seen here, the white backlash archive is primarily a collective narrative of scapegoating, either of social or ethnic groups (immigrants and ethnic minorities lumped into a reified ‘they’) or of the State, bureaucracy, the elites, the ‘do-gooders’, etc. Although empirically memory of the Scots porridge case has not been summoned by later generations, the affair itself is part of the memorial and cognitive warp and woof on which a myriad stories about ‘unfairness to whites’ have been woven.

In 1969, the white backlash archive was being written through sheer anecdotal accumulation, and that was reflected in the press. One example was an issue raised about the Yorkshire County Cricket Club, which required members to be born in Yorkshire. On this very

64 Claire Langhamer, “ ‘Who the hell are ordinary people?’ Ordinariness as a category of historical analysis”, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, Vol. 28, 2018, 175-195.

65 Norbert Elias, John L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders : A Sociological Enquiry Into Community Problems* (London : Sage, 1994 [1965]), 89.

66 On the social function of racist jokes, see for instance Michael Billig, “Comic Racism and Violence” in Sharon Lockyer, Michael Pickering (eds), *Beyond a Joke: the Limits of Humour* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 25-44.

question, the Race Relations Board stated that ‘to be born in Yorkshire is undoubtedly a distinction. But merely being born in Yorkshire does not in any way distinguish a man by colour, race or ethnic or national origin, and this is what the Act is all about.’⁶⁷ As the Scots porridge case was ongoing, sixty backbenchers came to the defence of the Yorkshire County Cricket Club, and the Minister of Sport was called upon to defend the local tradition, and amend section 6 of the Race Relations Act (1968) accordingly.

Concomitantly, an Australian insurance company that advertised for an Australian in order to deal with Australian cases in England was duly informed this was unlawful. Commenting on the case, Peter Pain (QC) from the RRB described a ‘steady flow of complaints from white people’ who pinpointed those adverts for ‘Indian people’ in ‘Indian restaurants’, whereas according to Pain they ought to have advertised for ‘someone who speaks Urdu’.⁶⁸ On December 24th 1969, *The Times* published a piece entitled ‘Whites welcome’, about a north-London supermarket run by Black Power advocates, and spearheaded by Michael X, which reassured the RRB that ‘whites would be welcome to work’ in the supermarket, after a complaint has been issued to the RRB. As has been evidenced already, the white backlash archive was powerfully fuelled by nightmarish visions of the American ghetto, and of ‘Black Power’ crossing the Atlantic to ‘get Whitey’ in the streets of London.⁶⁹ Such horror-stricken views of ‘Black Power’ rested on both an exaggeration of the radicality of the U.S. movement as well as on a wild exaggeration of its influence in England. As is well-known, Enoch Powell deftly instrumentalised those ‘American fears’.

Sometimes, individual Britons publicly ridiculed or defied what some of them saw as the ‘Gestapo State’ of inter-racial harmony. One Stan Collard, from Longham (Dorset), said he was writing to the R.R.B to check if he was not infringing the terms of the law. He published an advert

⁶⁷ *The Times*, ‘Race Vindication for Yorkshire’, 21. 11. 1969.

⁶⁸ *The Times*, ‘How Race Law is Misunderstood’, 21. 11. 1969.

⁶⁹ See Rob Waters, “Black Power on the Telly : America, Television, and Race Politics in 1960s and 1970s Britain”, *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 54, 2015, 947-970.

for a blacksmith.⁷⁰ A Scottish butcher in Bexley (Kent) deliberately published an advertisement for a ‘Scottish butcher able to cut Scottish meat’, before making it clear ‘I want to employ whom I want’.⁷¹ These are only a few examples. It was through these many anecdotal, provocative iterations that the white backlash archive was writing itself, celebrating in the process an English / British freedom presumably jeopardized by the liberal machinery of Harold Wilson’s Labour State.

Much of the white backlash archive cohered in the late 1960s with the three master frames of reactionary discourse as they have been theorized by Albert Hirschmann. These are the *perversity thesis*, the thesis of the perverse effect, the extent to which some liberal reforms are thought to bring about the contrary to what is planned. Of course, the Scots porridge case was a perfect illustration of this according to opponents of the Race Relations Act (1968). Secondly, the *futility thesis*, which proffers that such liberal schemes are useless. We have already touched upon this in references to Enoch Powell and conservative philosopher Maurice Cowling, but it should be added that furthering the futility thesis was the insistence on the sheer economic cost of such schemes. In one of its editorials, the *Daily Telegraph* exposed the time spent on a frivolous issue ‘at considerable cost in stationery and typist time’ before arguing that ‘public funds ought not to be squandered on the promotion of such comical eccentricities.’⁷² It was through such discourses exaggerating the size of a small bureaucracy that expressions like ‘race relations industry’ would win kudos with the radical right, from the National Front in the 1970s to the British National Party after 2000.

Lastly in Hirschmann’s analysis, the *jeopardy thesis*, stressing that such liberal reforms in fact imperil some “previous, precious accomplishment”.⁷³ In some of the reactions to the Scots porridge case as well as in epistolary support to Powell, one reads very serious concerns about a

70 *Daily Telegraph*, 21. 11. 1969.

71 *The Times*, 25. 11. 1969.

72 *Daily Telegraph*, ‘Illegal Porridge’, 20. 11. 1969.

73 See Albert Hirschmann, *The Rhetoric of Reaction : Perversity, Futility, Jeopardy*, Cambridge (Mass.) : Harvard University Press, 1992, 7-9.

universal form of English / British liberty won centuries ago with Magna Carta, as well as irritated comments on the impossibility to criticise such reforms without being called ‘racialist’.⁷⁴ Typically, one Scot wrote, in letters to the editor of the *Glasgow Herald*: ‘One wonders just what freedom is left to the individual before he or she is termed a racialist?’⁷⁵ One Powell supporter from Bristol one year before had written: “As I understand the Race Relations Bill it is the black charter.”⁷⁶ Across the fancied racial divide, Mohamad Farroq, a member of the Greater London Conciliation Committee enthusiastically promoted the legislation: “When this Bill becomes law it will be a Magna Carta for the coloured citizens of this country. It gives us our basic human rights.”⁷⁷ As is seen here, any breakthrough in the field of anti-discrimination was conceived through the prism of a kind of legal, nativist zero-sum game, which was also a way of removing non-white immigrants outside the bounds of the imagined community of a nation construed as white.

The Scots porridge case in the long run : concluding thoughts

What is argued in this article is that news items like the Scots porridge case of 1969 constitute the very anecdotal foundations upon which white backlash narratives have been historically constructed. These range from tory lampooning of anti-racist education in the 1980s⁷⁸ to the Brexit vote in 2016. In these myriad stories, it is often impossible to separate facts from fancy, through a complex process of exaggeration and mythologization, where ethnic minorities and State agents are reified into a vague ‘they’ under whose yoke whites must suffer. Much of this is about banning, a process which is both repugnant to liberal democracies and an onslaught on timeless traditions: they ‘banned Christmas’, they banned British identity (through the Parekh report of

74 In Britain in the late 1960s, ‘racialist’ was used much more often than ‘racist’.

75 *Glasgow Herald*, 21. 11. 1969.

76 SRO, PP, D3123/11.

77 *The London Illustrated News*, ‘The Race Relations Debate’, 18. 05. 1968.

78 See George Gheverghese Joseph, ‘The Politics of Anti-Racist Mathematics’, *European Education*, Vol. 26 (1), 1994, 67-74.

1998), they banned traditional Scottish porridge cooked by a Scot, it is claimed. The 1969 case itself is so apparently odd as to easily give credence to other stories which themselves are completely invented : from Pakistani immigrants who invade the attics of a whole row of houses in Blackburn in 1968-9 unbeknownst to the many native families living in them to public housing which is purposely built in such a way that their toilets do not face Mecca in the 2010s.⁷⁹ Isolated facts (Scots porridge) are exaggerated into systemic problems, which then foster the believability of pure myths. Such, it is suggested here, is the discursive and emotional grammar of white backlash, with its panoply of strategic phrases, ‘State Gestapo’, ‘race relations industry’, ‘PC police’, ‘unfairness to whites’ or ‘reverse discrimination.’ Strategically, such stories provide empirical substance to backlash frames, and connect the anecdotal ‘right here’ -Eastbourne, Barking, Blackburn- affecting known individuals to the systemic, global, faceless, bureaucratic ‘out there’, in Brussels, London, or Washington D.C.

⁷⁹ On the former, see Jeremy Seabrook, *City Close-Up* (Harmondsworth : Penguin, 1970), 36-7, about Blackburn ; on the latter, see Kjartan Páll Sveinsson (ed.), *Who Cares About the White Working-Class ?* (London : The Runnymede Trust, 2009), 47 ; available at : https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/WhoCares_AboutTheWhiteWorkingClass-2009.pdf

