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Lines of Dissent

A year ago the far right rampaged on our streets. How do we keep the peace?

"Shower upon us abundant rain," goes a Muslim prayer one learns in childhood, "swiftly and not delayed." A prayer for rain that makes sense in the desert. Imagine my surprise on learning the Church of England has one too. Whose idea was it to institute such a prayer in this soggy, inclement land?

Its diverse uses have, however, recently become apparent: in the middle of an inconvenient hosepipe ban, to foil defeat in the cricket, or – more seriously – to maintain public order in times so tense that the country is being called a "tinderbox" at risk of exploding again into nationwide rioting.

Last summer, a far-right frenzy gripped towns across Britain. Hotels housing asylum seekers were almost burned down. Now, another such hotel in Epping is subject to anti-migrant demonstrations; these are spreading. Fearing another summer of discord, officials have been appealing to the *deus ex machina* of the weather.

It's well known that hot summers provide the perfect conditions for public unrest to germinate. The London riots in 2011 were a summer affair, as were the 1981 England riots, the worst race-related violence the UK has seen. Tempers flare with temperatures. And rain souses the appetite to indulge in outdoor clashes.

A historic heatwave also provides the metaphor for simmering conflict in *Do the Right Thing* (1989), Spike Lee's classic film about racial tension in a predominantly black Brooklyn neighbourhood. Lee saturates the frame – Gauguin-like – with volcanic hues of red and orange. Our eyes are primed – lava will surely fly – and after a youngster is choked to death by a cop, as George Floyd would be, the community at last erupts into violence.

What would be the right thing to do in these circumstances? Lee is a dialectical filmmaker. He ends by quoting from two opposing – though equally compelling – schools of thought about political protest: Martin Luther King Jr's contention that violence is "both impractical and immoral", and Malcolm X's rejoinder, that when violence is "in self-defence, I call it intelligence". The film doesn't say which of these courses of action is, in the end, right.

I admire Malcolm X's courage. His insinuation that the bullet may ultimately be more effective than the ballot was born of the chronic failure of American democracy. But rewatching Lee's film, I found myself leaning more towards King. I recoiled during the climactic scene, when the amiable protagonist, Mookie, smashes up the Italian-American pizzeria that provides him with employment, a father-figure and a lively communal space (last year's rioters similarly ransacked their own community centres and amenities). Finally, the rioters threaten the local Asian-run grocery. At this moment, seeing such a familiar character threatened, I fully realised where it was that I stand in this debate.

For all my sympathy with this community ravaged by the violence of an unjust state, I could not accept this rage against blameless bystanders. I recalled the real-life Bangladeshi family in Minneapolis, whose livelihood – a restaurant – was destroyed in Black Lives Matter protests five years ago. "Let my building burn," its immigrant owner, Ruhel Islam, proclaimed, "justice needs to be served." The restaurant's name still sticks in the mind: Gandhi Mahal, in homage to the man whose still revolutionary doctrine of non-violence King was an adherent of. By overcoming self-interest and standing with a just cause at personal cost, so clearly was Ruhel Islam.

> Social cohesion will come, but only by withstanding difficult conversations

The rioters from *Do the Right Thing* and from last summer have divergent motives: Mookie and his friends in 1980s New York are crying out for racial justice, while last year's rioters were motivated, I do believe, by racial animus. Nevertheless, in distinct ways, they exemplify anxieties and resentments around race that can stew in any "melting pot" society. Incidents of police brutality or, as has recently been the trigger in UK unrest, sexual assault, can blow the lid off. When that happens, since time immemorial, immigrant communities like mine are the ones consumed in the fury.

How, then, to keep the lid on? This, now, is our challenge. Personally, I'd like to spread the Mahatma's teachings in Epping, but alas, that may fall on deaf ears. Severe sentencing was what the courts opted for – on violent demonstrators, deservedly, but also on inciteful or hateful speech. This, on reflection, seems appropriate. Terror was unleashed by the now jailed Lucy Connolly's call to burn down asylum hotels.

But such authoritarianism betrays a political establishment increasingly of the view that the country's diverse ethnic and religious make-up can no longer sustain open discussion of topics sensitive to its respective communities. Note the state's recent activity: a superinjunction to prevent media reporting on Afghan refugee resettlement; an Online Safety Act that is concealing from the public controversial footage; making it a crime even to voice support for Palestine Action; penalising the burning of a Koran.

Here, then, is a government that thinks segments of the population are so vexed by migration, or so offended by criticism of Israel, or Islam, that these conversations must be suppressed to keep the peace: ignorance coerced for the sake of bliss. If this is the cost of being tolerated, I don't really feel like paying it.

I refuse to believe the country is such a tinderbox. Social cohesion will come, but only by having and withstanding difficult conversations, not by avoiding them. That's how to do the right thing.

Failing that, I have my prayer for rain.

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