

**The new  
geographies of  
racism:  
Peterborough**

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The IRR's report: *The new geographies of racism: Plymouth* can be downloaded at: [http://www.irr.org.uk/pdf2/New\\_geographies\\_racism\\_Plymouth.pdf](http://www.irr.org.uk/pdf2/New_geographies_racism_Plymouth.pdf) (pdf file, 198kb).

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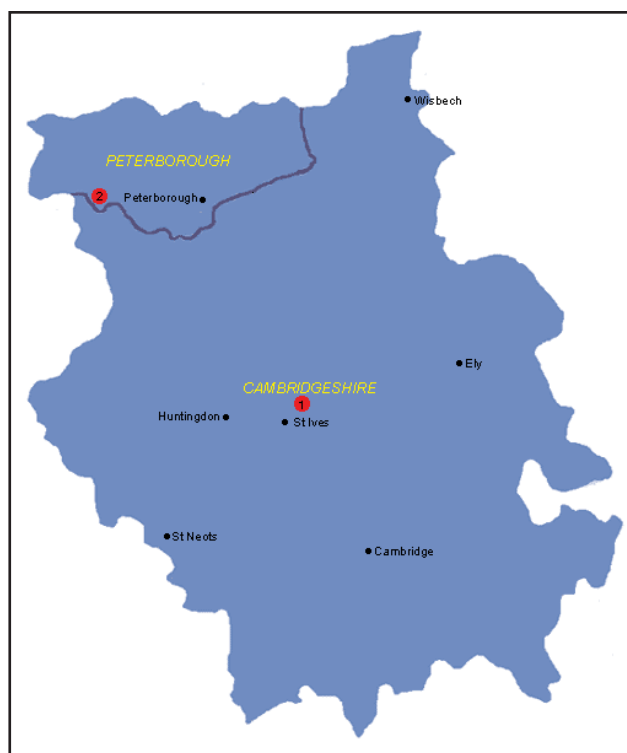
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## The county of Cambridgeshire<sup>1</sup>



## Peterborough<sup>2</sup>



### Introduction

In 2010, the Institute of Race Relations (IRR) published *Racial violence: the buried issue*,<sup>3</sup> a report analysing 660 racist attacks which took place throughout the UK in 2009. The findings indicated that patterns of racial violence in the UK are shifting. Whereas previously, attacks were frequently

concentrated in impoverished inner and outer areas in large conurbations, there is now a marked increase in racist incidents in rural areas, towns and smaller cities. Such is the extent of violence in some of these areas that it appears almost routine.

Over the last decade, the demography of the UK has altered significantly and, put simply, as patterns of migration and settlement have changed, so too have patterns of racial violence. According to successive governments, this is symptomatic of breakdowns in community cohesion, unsuccessful integration and even a failure of multiculturalism. However, such explanations ignore and downplay the role of state policies and actions which set the tone for popular racism and the context within which such attacks take place. Vicious attacks against asylum seekers and migrant workers have become a regular occurrence in some areas. Radical transformations in local economies, relying on deregulated, unprotected and flexible labour forces, have pushed workers into jobs where they are isolated, vulnerable and exposed to a risk of violence. As particular forms of popular racism have formed nationally – such as anti-Muslim racism generated through the war on terror – localised racisms have manifested themselves in abuse, harassment and brutality. Far-right organisations, in such climates, have been able to capitalise on emerging hostilities.

Against this backdrop, the IRR is conducting detailed investigations into three of the areas which *Racial violence: the buried issue* identified as experiencing specific manifestations of racist attacks. The first of these investigations focused on Plymouth, in the south-west of England; the second on Stoke-on-Trent in the county of Staffordshire.<sup>4</sup> This third report focuses on Peterborough, a city in Cambridgeshire described by hopeful estate agents talking up its proximity to England's rural idyll as the 'gateway to the Fens', vilified by the *Daily Express* as 'Britain's migrant squatter shambles' and condemned by the *Daily Mail*, variously, as 'the town the Poles took over', 'a city crumbling under pressure from immigrants' and 'a symbol of the changing face of Britain'.<sup>5</sup>

Peterborough has become the focal point of a series of tabloid exposés over the last few years, reinforced by the pronouncements of politicians, on the impact of immigration in the UK's towns and cities. Almost without fail, their target has been the migrant workers who have found employment in the city's changing economy. These workers are blamed for increasing unemployment, for undermining welfare, for higher levels of violence and crumbling public services, and the city is evocated as an example of the fault-line in successive governments' immigration policies. Yet beneath these headlines

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(and fuelled, in part, by them) anti-foreigner and racist attacks have involved vicious beatings and firebombings. The same voices which set out in meticulous detail the origins, incomes and characteristics of Peterborough's 'foreign population explosion' (as described by the *Mail*), voyeuristically inspecting their living conditions, (alleged) eating habits and number of children, have much less to say about the enmity and violence to which they have been subject.

This report examines the patterns of racial violence which have emerged in Peterborough over the last decade, including hate campaigns against asylum seekers, the hounding of migrant workers and attacks against more long-standing communities. In doing so, it investigates the political context within which such attacks have taken place, the responses by local and central government and the resistance and counter-mobilisations that have emerged. It draws on interviews with migrant workers and community activists, and utilises a range of statistical sources, highlighting cases from the IRR's database on racist attacks.

### *The city of Peterborough*

Peterborough, in the county of Cambridgeshire, sits on the edge of the Fenlands: a 1,500 square mile agricultural sprawl described by some, referring to the churches and cathedrals situated within its boundaries, as the 'holy land of the English'. Thousands of tourists are attracted each year to the city's Elizabethan and Gothic manor houses, its seventh century abbey and its close rural heritage sites. To the east is a permanent Bronze Age archaeological site; to the west an internationally renowned nature reserve. Steeped in ancient folklore and with a history intertwined with the monarchy, it would normally be exactly the sort of place that the tabloid press loves. A 'beautiful and once quintessentially English city' is how the *Daily Mail*, for example, describes it.<sup>6</sup> But the emphasis is on 'once'. Now, the city is depicted as a symbol of what happens when supposedly lax immigration policies and supposedly over-generous welfare policies converge. When journalists want a story about the perils of immigration, or when politicians seek a shot of political capital by claiming they will 'solve' the same, they turn to Peterborough.

Peterborough has a long history of immigration, in part related to its designation as a 'new town' following the Second World War, but also tied to its railways and its once thriving brick industry. In 2009, it had a population of over 170,000 (a figure which is higher now), of whom a higher proportion than average were Asian Pakistani (about 6,200 or

nearly five per cent); about 5,000 were black African or Caribbean and about 1,000 were Chinese.<sup>7</sup> But the focus of this national attention is generally on the migrant workers who have moved into the city, mainly over the last eight-or-so-years – frequently employed in back-breaking jobs in the construction industries, in factories, in catering, as carers and in the agricultural hinterlands surrounding the locality. These unique, marshy, mineral-rich surrounds provide the raw materials for an agri-business sector which is vital for the city and the surrounding region's economy. According to some estimates there are about 4,000 farms in the Fenlands. Between them and the other aspects of the agricultural industries they account for some 27,000 jobs. Potato crops alone generate about £230 million annually.<sup>8</sup> Yet, as the city's Regional Economic Partnership has explained, in the midst of a financial crisis, 'The rural economy is currently being buffeted by many supply-side shocks which will impact its competitiveness, both regionally and internationally'. As such, 'It must become flexible and agile enough to respond effectively to these in order to contribute fully to the rising prosperity of the sub-region.'<sup>9</sup> Translated, 'flexible' and 'agile' mean an economy where the risks facing businesses (such as upturns in prices and down-turns in demand) are passed down from employer to employee. And as austerity measures begin to kick in, it is the city's migrant workers who are bearing the brunt.

More than 20,000 migrants have moved into Peterborough or the immediate surrounding areas over the last decade, with much of this inward migration having taken place against a backdrop of European expansion. According to a study commissioned by the city council, over 8,500 Polish people registered for a national insurance number between 2002 and 2008, as did about 3,500 people from Lithuania and 2,500 people from Slovakia.<sup>10</sup> Some of this was made up of families. Between 2003 and 2007 the proportion of children attending the city's schools from BME backgrounds increased from about 23 to 30 per cent,<sup>11</sup> and in 2012 it was estimated that about 31 per cent of those children in the city's primary schools spoke English as a second language.<sup>12</sup> Much, though, has consisted of single migrant workers.

Those who did arrive in Peterborough in this period moved to a city where the local economy was expanding rapidly, amidst claims of a localised urban renaissance. Between 2003 and 2008, the number of jobs increased at a rate almost twice that of the national average.<sup>13</sup> Market analysts boasted of a diverse economy and emerging technologies, and glossy brochures promoted a £1 billion regeneration project. With zeal, a re-imagined

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city was trumpeted and such was the importance of migrant labour to this restructuring that by 2007, one-in-ten jobs in the city were being filled by migrant workers, rising to one-in-five soon after.<sup>14</sup>

All of this was welcomed by employers eager to take advantage of the benefits that migrant workers brought to their businesses and one company, for example, explained in 2006 that it had taken on about 100 new Polish staff as unemployment was so low in the city that there were not enough job seekers to fill the posts.<sup>15</sup> It was welcomed too by gangmasters securing employment and landlords providing housing. Of course, many people who have moved to Peterborough as migrant workers have found employment that is well-paid and secure. Others, though, haven't. With many people only allowed to stay in the UK 'legally' if they remained in the job they had registered to work in, employers were given a green-light to exploit their employees – paying poverty wages, withholding money, forcing ever longer hours of work and taking away reductions to pay for pre-arranged housing. The consequences, entirely predictable, soon became apparent. In 2005, housing inspectors found ten men living in a tiny brick lock-up in the back of someone's garden. Their accommodation had no electricity and no heating, and filthy mattresses were crammed into whatever small space was available.<sup>16</sup> Such was the frequency with which migrant workers were being forced to work and live in dangerous, degrading conditions that, at one point, the council claimed that an average of five people per day were ringing to report overcrowding in neighbouring houses,<sup>17</sup> and a Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) said that he was coming across several cases of workplace exploitation per day. Although cuts in funding and a general shift away from enforcement meant that the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) rarely investigated the safety of these working conditions, when it did so, serious injuries were reported, such as a woman losing three fingertips in a conveyor belt.<sup>18</sup> Within the space of a few years, Peterborough had become a city with an underbelly of modern day 'slavery' and, in 2008, one of the UK's biggest ever operations investigating the treatment of migrant workers by the Gangmasters Licensing Authority (GLA) uncovered up to sixty employees living in abject squalor (of whom some, but not all lived in the city), working up to thirteen hours a day without breaks, suffering from skin infections caused by acids used to treat the vegetables they were picking and being subjected to beatings if they complained. The gangmasters whom they worked for had made over £10 million providing leeks to main-

stream supermarkets on the back of their labour.<sup>19</sup>

As one migrant worker interviewed for this research explained, towards the beginning of the twenty-first century it was such exploitation, in housing and employment, which was the main issue to contend with in the city. 'For too many of us', he said, 'our jobs were tough, we missed home, our homes here were dirty with too many people. But work, I know many, many people who have worked until they dropped. You really don't know what work is like in many of the jobs we are offered. Nobody knows until you do it.' That is not to say that exploitation was the *only* concern – a number of arson attacks in 2005 on employment agencies employing migrant workers, suspected as being racially motivated, for example, indicated that there were other kinds of physical risks.<sup>20</sup> But abuse, harassment and violence at that point was more often than not reported to the police.

All of this, however, for some people at least, was set to change. For, according to this same person, in the years which followed, the relationship between some migrant workers and certain government bodies deteriorated. As a consequence, the basis of their struggles widened – still incorporating concerns about working and living conditions, but extending to contend with what was an increasingly hostile political climate. And this, in turn, had particular repercussions in relation to the physical attacks and abuse to which migrant workers were subject. Part of the reason for this apparent antagonism resided in the already discussed tabloid assault on the presence of migrant workers and the manner in which the city was evocated as *the* national exemplar of all that they said was wrong with immigration policy. A particular low-point of this campaign was a plethora of stories accusing homeless eastern European migrants of a 'slaughter of the swans' (in the *Daily Mail's* terminology), 'stalking the creatures of the River Nene' and 'raping' the city's waterways.<sup>21</sup> But these articles were only a continuation of a wider set of poisonous investigations maintaining that immigration was overwhelming the city's entire fabric. In one, the *Daily Mail* reported on the migrants who had 'quickly learned how to work the benefits system', describing how 'a queue of girls speaking foreign tongues snakes down the road' outside an Inland Revenue Office and telling readers how 'their buggies and prams crowd the pavement as they wait to sign on for tax credits and child benefits'.<sup>22</sup> In another, the *Sun* explained how Peterborough was a 'city in crisis'.<sup>23</sup> This was nothing less than tabloid vilification and it was no surprise that at one point a local politician publicly hit back, rallying against the way that these headlines were damaging the

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city's image. But, in some cases, it was the well of antagonism by particular local and national politicians towards migrant workers which the tabloids were drawing on.

### *Expendable workers subject to violence?*

In contrast to those businesses welcoming migrant workers, eager to utilise the benefits they brought as a work-force, the local political response was always more nuanced. Essential work has been carried out in Peterborough, informing people of their rights and providing advice. The New Link project, for example, is a vital service originating initially from the Red Cross and latterly working in conjunction with the city council, offering support, advocating on people's behalf. Yet, notwithstanding this and other similar work, some political leaders have been accused of drawing upon and exploiting their constituents' anger over immigration into the city for political gain. (In 2004, for example, the Conservatives handed out 40,000 leaflets claiming that 100,000 'gipsies' from Poland and Slovakia were heading to Peterborough.)<sup>24</sup> And others further described the presence of migrant workers by way of a balance, wherein the economic plus-side had to be weighed against what was perceived to be a social cost. Of course, increased immigration did mean there would be an increase in numbers of people attending schools, accessing services and so on. But articulating immigration in such binary terms merely reinvigorated age-old conceptions that the work was wanted but not the worker. And in this context, certain councillors saw no contradiction in commending those who filled skill shortages in a time of low unemployment, whilst at the same time condemning a lack of funds from the government to compensate for what was described as an 'influx' of people, stating that Peterborough was left 'holding the baby'.<sup>25</sup> The consequence of this perspective was that if the 'balance' was to tip, and migrant workers stopped being useful as units of labour, then ambivalence could quickly turn to antipathy. And this is exactly what happened when the 2008 financial crisis and the brutal austerity measures which followed, began to impact. 'When you have a short-term contract, or no contract', one person explained, 'you are the first out when times are bad. That is always the way.'

Homelessness charities in Peterborough had already voiced their concerns about people rough-sleeping in the city. In 2004, for example, casual workers from Poland and the Czech Republic turned to sleeping in an old car and under blankets in a park having been manipulated and exploited by a labour agency.<sup>26</sup> But in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, increasing numbers of people began to

be forced into homelessness, resorting to squatting in back yards or setting up desperate makeshift camps, reminiscent of shanty towns, on roundabouts and in woods. The conditions were harsh and in 2009, Zilvinas Orzekauskas, a 41-year-old Lithuanian man, died after been found unconscious, surrounded by empty bottles of cider and whiskey and lying on cardboard boxes which he had tried to turn into some kind of shelter. Yet although by 2010 it was estimated that as many as fifteen camps were dotted around the city, their inhabitants' misery only served to fuel further vilification by the national press. Journalists jostled to depict the fetid conditions, drawing from the rage of politicians whose response to this desperate poverty made absolutely clear that migrant workers were not seen as anything more than expendable – to be dispensed with when no longer of economic use.

In 2010, a project was launched in Peterborough, rounding-up homeless migrants and attempting to force them to leave the UK. It was the first of its kind in the country. Dispelling any potential doubts about its underlying rationale, the then immigration minister Phil Woolas stated, 'People have to be working, studying or self-sufficient and if they are not we expect them to return home ... This scheme to remove European nationals who aren't employed is getting them off the streets and back to their own country.'<sup>27</sup> Stewart Jackson, a local MP, went further, describing them as 'vagrants' and telling the media, 'I don't know how these migrants are surviving sleeping rough on roundabouts and bushes but they are a drain on my constituents and taxpayers ... If they are not going to contribute to this country, then, as citizens of their home country, they should return there.'<sup>28</sup>

With some homeless migrants forced to leave the country 'voluntarily', and others forcibly removed, the project was touted as a 'success'. But in the meantime, angry residents had attempted to remove those who were homeless through other means. Physical attacks on those sleeping rough were by no means unheard of in Peterborough, and in 2009 emergency services had been called to an arson attack on a group eastern European migrants' tents, the culmination of a persistent hate campaign, which could have been fatal according to a firefighter at the scene.<sup>29</sup> The difference now though was that, according to one person interviewed for this research, people would no longer turn to the police for support. 'Why would anyone go to the people who want to get rid of us?', he remarked. 'Many people are scared; they won't go to anyone for help. They keep out of sight. That is the best way.'

Of course, not all of those attacks on eastern

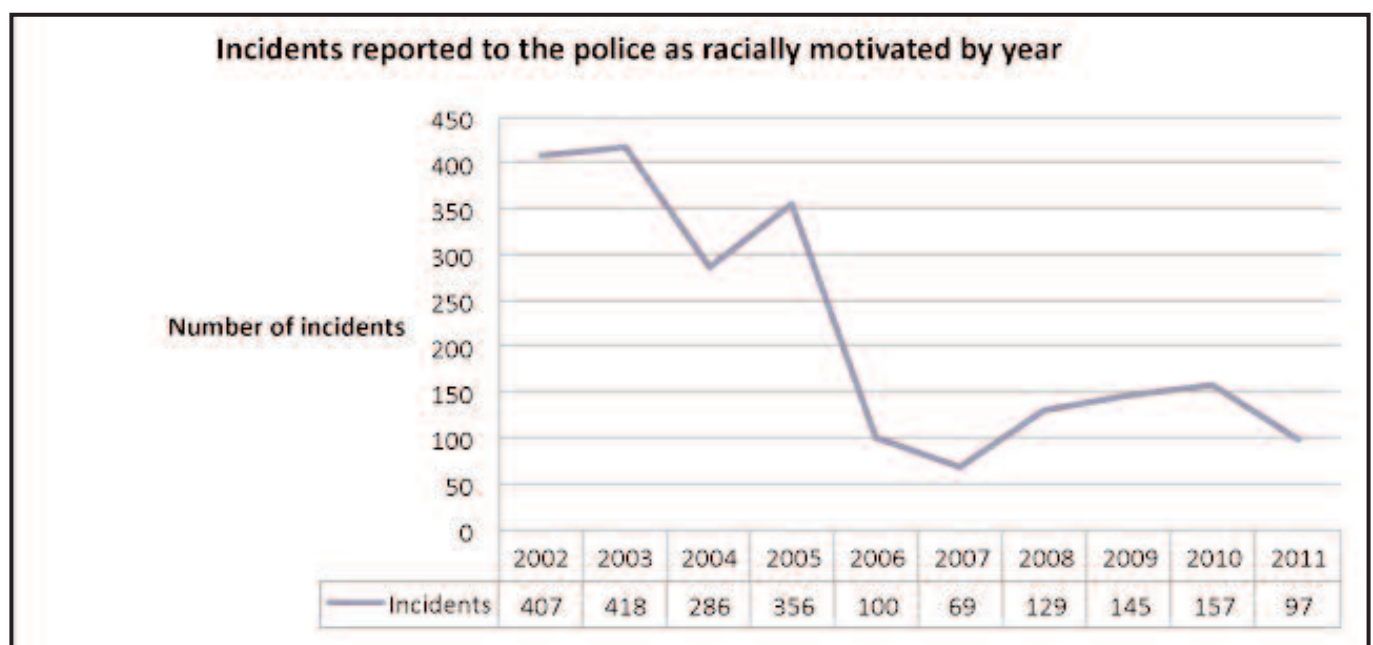
Europeans have been confined to those who found themselves out of work, rough-sleeping and vulnerable to abuse, and in 2008, for example, a school governing body was suspended after it emerged that it had failed to protect Polish children who were being bullied.<sup>30</sup> Yet the rhetorical question above may go some way to explaining a significant drop in racially motivated incidents reported to the police over roughly the last decade. 407 incidents were reported to the police in 2002, falling to ninety-seven in 2011, despite Maheeb Ladha, the director of the Peterborough Racial Equality Council's (PREC) explanation that, 'The conditions [for racial violence] are ripe. People feel very upset and very angry because of the insecurity... There is no doubt in my mind that hate crimes are going up and this is to do with the recession.' As he made clear in an interview with the *Peterborough Evening Telegraph* (PET) in 2012, 'We have had a substantial reduction in the crime figures. To suggest that it is down to the way those incidents are recorded is rubbish. We have to explain whether that reduction is because people don't have confidence in the police or that they don't have a problem anymore ... There seems to be a very serious problem in under reporting race hate crime. It might be that there is no such crime, but all the evidence suggests otherwise.'<sup>31</sup>

### *Bullying asylum seekers*

Anger towards migrant workers was underpinned by the manner in which Peterborough was depicted as a city buckling under the 'strain' of their presence. But this portrayal, of a city experiencing some kind of siege, was by no way confined solely to migrant workers and was equally pronounced in relation to

asylum seekers. Peterborough was one of many towns and cities designated as a dispersal area for asylum seekers in 1999, as the then Labour government sought to reduce the 'burden' of accommodating them within and around London. Based on the notion that their presence undermined social cohesion, dispersal worked on the presumption that housing them in smaller numbers, dotted around the country, would dilute this negative impact. It was a message that was hammered home repeatedly by a procession of government ministers warning of the perils of 'swamping' where too many asylum seekers lived.

As a policy, dispersal was always destined to be disastrous. Shunting a section of the population, that was being vilified, into towns and cities which neither wanted them nor were prepared for them was a cruel social experiment. And almost immediately within Peterborough, resentment was whipped up around their presence. Open hostility by central government fed into open enmity by certain local politicians. Upon hearing that the locality was to accommodate 800 asylum seekers, the council leader accused the government of giving the city an 'ultimatum', claiming 'They're going to send hundreds of refugees, whether we like it or not.'<sup>32</sup> And his rant marked the first of many by local politicians which echoed the messages of government policy – that asylum seekers were stretching services to breaking point, that they were flooding the country with people of 'alien' culture, that they increased crime rates and so on – but with an added rider that Peterborough was bearing more of a brunt than anywhere else. It was Janus-faced fury, directed both at asylum seekers and the government which was shoving them into the city, and it led to calls for ramped up deportations, rage at



how the city was a 'soft touch', and the backing of plans to house asylum seekers in camps, free to leave but only on condition of forfeiting any support. In 2004, the Conservative Mayor of Peterborough, in an extraordinary diatribe, claimed that the city had gone into 'asylum meltdown', describing it as a 'crime-ridden, rubbish-strewn hellhole' and arguing that 'Many of the newcomers have learned to milk the system. They receive benefits and comfortable housing, then take cash-in-hand jobs ... Flaunting flashy cars, designer clothes and mobiles, they have infuriated locals'. Was he a 'hero' or a 'zero', the *PET* asked its readers, in an article touting him as the man 'who dared to speak his mind...?'<sup>33</sup> The answer, apparently, was the former. The mayor survived a vote of no confidence, receiving significant support from his party and readers of the paper.

Had these same people offering their support been regular readers of the *PET*, in the years when dispersal policies began to take shape, they would have read a variety of human interest stories about the struggles facing individual asylum seekers, but they also would have read that the city faced a 'flood' of asylum seekers, that it was being 'saturated' by people and that the 'flow of refugees can't be stopped'.<sup>34</sup> No matter that between 1999 and 2004, only a few thousand asylum seekers were dispersed to the city. According to one of the *PET*'s columnists, Mike Colton, the 'ordinary folk' of the city were finding it 'difficult to believe that all of the hundreds of thousands who come here would really be at risk of physical harm if they went back home'. 'Why do all the refugees seem to be healthy young men?' he enquired. 'We never see mothers with babes in arms.' Describing an image of a young man using a mobile phone, he asked 'Who bought this presumably penniless youngster his phone and who was he calling? Since he can hardly know any Peterborians he is probably talking to his pals. And who pays for their phones?' 'It's the kind of thing ... that doesn't arouse sympathy.'<sup>35</sup>

What would have aroused a bit more 'sympathy', presumably, would have been behaving in a way that was seen to befit the abject poverty and marginalisation that asylum seekers were experiencing. And this throwback to conceptions of the deserving and undeserving poor found its way into the formulation of policy responses to their presence in the city. Thus, much like with migrant workers, it did not take long for stories to emerge about asylum seekers living in run-down houses, with living-room's doubling up as makeshift bedrooms, mould seeping from the walls and no running water. One bed-sit was described by fire-officers as a 'death-trap', with no way to escape if the building was set

alight. Yet when a local councillor called for an end to the ongoing exploitation, he neglected to mention that years previously the council itself had confirmed that asylum seekers would be given the 'least lettable properties'. In a similar context, the leader of the council launched a staggering tirade at the Immigration Advisory Service (IAS - an organisation providing free legal advice) in 2003, when it opened an office in Peterborough, on the basis that it would be a 'magnet for illegal asylum seekers'. In a letter to the head of the IAS, Councillor Neville Sanders accused the organisation's 'trendy Wendy lawyers' of 'subsidising 'economic immigrants without guilt or shame' and condemned asylum seekers for saturating services and draining resources.<sup>36</sup> The message was clear: those asylum seekers in the city must be seen to be living in penury.

In such a context, a spate of brutal racist attacks was all but inevitable. And some seeking asylum were subjected to a barrage of racist abuse and violence: the two Iraqi men, for example, set upon by a group of youths in 2001 who chased one to his home, smashing windows and looting the house before chasing another resident from the property and beating him with a hammer and an iron bar;<sup>37</sup> the Kurdish man beaten by a fifteen-strong gang with sticks in 2004, soon after they had smashed an Asian dairy owner to the floor with a block of concrete;<sup>38</sup> the residents of flats targeted in a spate of arson attacks in 2003;<sup>39</sup> the 19-year-old Iraqi man who, after having a petrol bomb thrown through the window of his flat in 2004, begged to be moved, saying 'I am now scared to stay here and am going crazy because I feel that I have no way to escape this violence';<sup>40</sup> the man attacked by a gang of youths in 2007 who kicked him, beat him and smashed a bottle over his head.<sup>41</sup> When a new housing development for key workers was planned in one area of the city, hundreds of people signed a petition against it, and council leaders were deluged by abusive letters because of a rumour that the properties were to house 'asylum seekers, drug addicts and people committing crime'.<sup>42</sup> Other residents, even when they didn't object to living near asylum seekers *per se*, still complained about their presence on the basis of the violence they were experiencing. 'Asylum seekers can become the target of racist attacks', said one man, 'and I don't want those problems around here'.<sup>43</sup>

### *Reducing racism to migration*

What the examples above point to is a flurry of attacks against 'new' communities of migrant workers and asylum seekers set against a backdrop of



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ill-thought out policies and media sensationalism. Yet according to a local MP, speaking to the House of Commons in 2007, where tensions and hostilities have emerged they are nothing to do with the response to migration, but the presence of people in-and-of itself. Suburbs which were once 'settled and peaceful' in Peterborough were becoming 'ghettoised', he claimed. Continuing to suggest that 'resentment, anger and hostility is rising in the host communities' and maintaining that 'the police try to keep disparate communities from conducting turf wars, which prevents them from tackling routine crime.' This analysis carried weight, and the sentiments were echoed in a joint letter written by three councillors in 2010, sent to the leaders of the three main political parties in the UK. 'Until only a few years ago', the letter said, 'everyone in this part of Peterborough lived in peace and harmony'. Yet because of the city's new arrivals a startling array of problems had emerged: from protection rackets to robberies, from 'muggings' to neighbourhood disputes and from burglaries to drug-dealing. Services, they said, were overburdened, people could no longer walk the streets in safety and young people had no access to social housing.<sup>44</sup>

The message underlying this was clear: immigration was creating and exacerbating tensions in a once peaceful city which, in some cases, was spilling over into violence. In this analysis, racism was a relatively recent by-product of immigration and its fracturing of community relations. Yet whilst there were indeed instances where violence was exacerbated as a result of community tensions (the clashes between Iraqis and Pakistanis in 2004, for example),<sup>45</sup> by reducing racism to community fractions caused by relatively recent migration, this had the effect of ignoring any broader context to this violence and how it was exacerbated. Furthermore, intentionally or otherwise, it downplayed to the point of defining-out those racist attacks which had taken place against and by more long-standing communities as well as the framework within which this harassment and abuse emerged.

According to Maheeb Ladha, analysing racial incidents reported both to the police and also to independent organisations year after year reveals that Peterborough has over the last decade developed its own internal 'geographies' of racism, where attacks and abuse are frequently concentrated. Some of these areas, he says, are those with concentrated populations of eastern European migrants, but by no means all of them. Some are areas where the vernacular of an expanding economy and urban renaissance has never carried much weight – areas which show the meaning of statis-

tics indicating that Peterborough has some of the most acute poverty levels and glaring social inequalities in the country.<sup>46</sup> Some are areas where casual racism spills over into brutal harassment.

One such example involved a partially-sighted Pakistani man (Mr Ali) who ended up in court in 2004, accused of grievous bodily harm and attacking a white male with a samurai sword, almost severing one of his hands. Throughout the trial though, it became clear that the allegations were false. Contrary to the claims made, Mr Ali and his family – the only Asian family living on a particular estate – had been subjected to a campaign of harassment, bullying and intimidation by a group of people, including the man maliciously accusing him of being the aggressor. Born with a pigmentation disorder, the man was described as a 'white Paki' by those who targeted him, and he and his family had previously been beaten up in their home and threatened with petrol bombs. The group of youths had over 100 convictions between them, including racially motivated offences. On the night of the incident, it emerged that what had actually happened was that they had gathered once more outside Mr Ali's family home and he had called the police on several occasions, scared for his safety. The sword was never found and it was alleged in court that the youths had concocted a story about it being wielded by Mr Ali. There was no forensic evidence linking him to the attack. The jury took less than hour to clear him, and he explained afterwards that the harassment had become so intense over a period of eight years that the family had been forced to move house and he no longer felt safe leaving his home.<sup>47</sup>

Mr Ali's experiences have been shared by others targeted by organised groups of people determined to bully, intimidate and ultimately terrorise. One couple with two young children were moved by the council after a group intimidated them for months before finally smashing the front door and beating the father with baseball bats and planks of wood, bursting blood vessels in his eyes and causing puncture wounds. 'The worst thing is we know a lot of these people and have given their names to the police, but nothing has been done', the mother explained.<sup>48</sup> In a similar example, a pregnant woman and her husband were targeted by a group of teenagers sitting on their garden wall who jeered at them for speaking Urdu and then threw stones at the house after the couple asked them to leave. Soon after, up to twenty people began gathering outside their house regularly, shouting abuse at them when they left their home, throwing stones at the property and on one occasion scrawling the word 'Paki' on one of their windows.<sup>49</sup> When, in

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2010, two Asian men walking through a park were jumped and savagely attacked by a group of people with sticks and bricks, in what the police believed was a racist attack, pupils of a local school reported that they no longer felt safe walking round the area.<sup>50</sup> And when, in 2008, a representative of the city's biggest landlord was called for a meeting with the police, she claimed that 'race hate' in one area of the city was 'spiralling out of control'.<sup>51</sup>

None of these serious racist attacks could be reduced simply to immigration into the city. Nor, for example, were the attacks on Sikhs after 9/11 by people who thought they looked like Osama bin Laden, the distribution of leaflets in the city centre urging people to kill Muslims in 2003,<sup>52</sup> the unprovoked attack on a schoolboy, leaving him unconscious and needing a skin graft that same year,<sup>53</sup> the attack on a Muslim man outside his home in 2007, the brutal beating of a 38-year-old man in 2009, by an attacker who carried on stamping on his victim's head after he had knocked him to the verge of unconsciousness,<sup>54</sup> or the abuse of staff working in the night-time economy in takeaways and as taxi-drivers. Yet reducing racism simply to the product of immigration and community tension not only serves a convenient political purpose (reinforcing calls for stricter border controls, or ramping up deportations, for example), it furthers the view of the state as an impartial arbiter of its effects.

### *Responding to racial violence*

Within Peterborough, significant efforts have been made to respond to racial violence. Independent organisations, such as the PREC and 'Open Out Cambridgeshire' (a third-party reporting scheme established as a result of the 1999 Macpherson Report) provide essential services, ensuring that victims of 'hate crime' are supported and scrutinising the actions of the criminal justice system (among other things). A 'Unity' scheme has made significant inroads with young people in the city. Moreover, the police have actively instigated several strategies, with a 'crack-down' on hate crime in 2011, as one, relatively recent, illustration of an attempt to improve reporting of crimes and work with victims and victims' groups. In certain circumstances, such police initiatives have had valuable impacts. When Ross Parker, a white teenager, was viciously murdered by three Asian men in 2001, for example, the police vigorously pursued the perpetrators (three of whom were given life-sentences) and in the aftermath worked with community groups to resolve hostilities and tensions. A few years after the murder, the National Front (NF) cynically planned a march in the city to 'commemorate'

the teenager's death, and the police condemned the move along with the deceased's father who made clear, 'They're not concerned for Ross, they're doing it for political gain. It's wrong. All they're going to do is incite more racial hatred, and you're going to end up with more people being killed'.<sup>55</sup>

At the same time though, the police response to violence against BME communities has in some cases been denounced as ineffective. In 2012, Gholam Hussein, a taxi-driver, was assaulted by some of his passengers in an attack which left him with a fractured eye-socket. Yet despite at least one of the culprits being identified, the police initially failed to apprehend the offenders. In a meeting between the Peterborough Private Hire Drivers' Association, other interested parties and the police, cabbies vented their frustration and anger, at one point making clear they wanted the police themselves to be investigated. And their rancour stemmed from a belief that the police were failing to protect workers in what is a notoriously dangerous profession.<sup>56</sup>

Formulating responses to racial violence, and 'hate crime' more widely, the police have actively participated in multi-agency approaches in the city. But the problem, however, is that consensus established with the police around 'race' can break down when the aims of grassroots campaigns conflict with criminal justice priorities. And this is exactly what happened when the English Defence League (EDL) converged on the city in December 2010. This march according to the organisation's literature, was based on the EDL's self-proclaimed role as supporters of servicemen in nearby RAF Wittering. It also drew upon the murder of Ross Parker. In the run up, a counter-demonstration was organised by Muslim groups, trades unions and anti-fascists, but the police encouraged and ultimately obstructed Muslims from attending the demonstration, ostensibly to maintain public order. According to Maheeb Ladha, this was achieved on the basis of an agreement that the police would protect Muslim interests, and their absence would decrease the likelihood of violence.

In the event, the police corralled about 500 EDL supporters, separating them from counter protesters, and senior EDL figures were able to deliver without any opposition particularly vicious speeches. This included their figurehead Tommy Robinson claiming that 'Islam is a disease. [Shouts of 'fuck-ing scum' from the crowd] It is a disease. Winston Churchill once said Islam in a man is the same as rabies in a dog,<sup>57</sup> as well as Guramit Singh's rant that the Prophet Muhammed was a 'paedophilic pirate'.<sup>58</sup> After this, EDL members broke through police lines to attack trades unionists and pitched

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battles were fought, with the counter-protesters supported by Muslims who had been able to finally join them. As the Trades Council president, Ron Graves, explained, the day ended up being a 'victory for anti-fascists', after they forced the EDL back. But in some senses the longer-term damage emerged in the aftermath.

Following the demonstrations, Guramit Singh was arrested on suspicion of causing religiously aggravated harassment, alarm or distress after a member of the public complained about the language used in his 'speech'. However, the charges were eventually discontinued by the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS). And as one interviewee said, this was perceived by Muslims who had been convinced to stay away from the demonstration as betrayal. 'The argument being made from the Muslim community was "why didn't any of you have the conscience to say that I am so appalled by this that it is not acceptable?" Why didn't any police officer go on record and report what was said? Remember, the most reliable witnesses were the police; the police had told Muslims not to go. The Muslims said "you wanted us to stay away but you have not done anything when our prophet has been insulted. You made a number of promises to us, and did not keep their side of the bargain". The police say that is not their role, that their role is to ensure public order. But then this comes at a cost. The police were so tolerant that they ended up being indifferent. They upheld the EDL's right to freedom of speech, but freedom of speech needs to be balanced against other freedoms; especially when this freedom is interpreted as the freedom to call the prophet a paedophile.'

### *Conclusion*

In December 2011, a Peterborough MP commended a House of Commons cross-party group on 'balanced migration', those other MPs who had brought up the subject of contemporary immigration and paid tribute to the work of the organisation 'Migration Watch UK', stating that for nine years it 'has ploughed a lonely furrow, having been traduced as racist and as having some kind of hidden agenda to propagate community discord ... [despite] more often than not [being] right in raising the tenor of the debate and allowing mainstream politicians to debate in a meaningful way based on facts'.<sup>59</sup> Notwithstanding statisticians suggesting that Migration Watch UK is an organisation that presents 'evidence that is far from balanced, using claims that are factually inaccurate',<sup>60</sup> this claim sheds light on a context wherein any challenge to condemnations of immigration is itself reviled as a supposed attempt to close down any

semblance of debate or discussion.

Of course, this one MP is by no means indicative of an entire range of perspectives on the impacts of immigration in the city. Of course, immigration within Peterborough has impacted on its social and demographic make-up. And of course, it is right for local authorities to desire support when changes in their constituencies take place. Yet whilst tabloids have lined up to portray the city as overrun, collapsing and overwhelmed by the presence of migrants – readily provided with quotes and statistics from certain political figures arguing the same – the question has to be asked whether this contributes to community tensions and racist attacks. Attacks against (predominantly eastern European) migrant workers are by no means the only forms of violence that have taken place; but according to migrant workers interviewed for this research, they are increasingly less likely to be reported when certain statutory agencies see (or are perceived to see) their role as removing people from the country when they are no longer of economic use.

What exists at the moment, throughout the UK, is a political consensus, hammered home repeatedly, that immigration is undermining the social fabric of the UK, whilst at the same time an austerity programme which is pushing more and more people into poverty, eradicating employment, exacerbating inequalities and eroding the public services which migrants are blamed for putting pressure on. This is a recipe for hostilities and violence, and it is in places like Peterborough where the fallout will be clear.

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