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# Negotiating race and religion in the West Midlands: Narratives of inclusion and exclusion during the 1967-69 Wolverhampton bus workers' turban dispute

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## Abstract

This article considers the 1967-9 Wolverhampton Transport turban dispute in the context of increased anxiety over immigration to the area and Wolverhampton South West MP Enoch Powell's April 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech. We trace the narratives of the dispute through letters to the Editor in local newspaper *The Express & Star*, and argue that the letters column was a site of community construction for writers and readers, which elevated the issue from a trivial industrial dispute to a symbol around which the deep anxieties of race and nation coalesced.

**Key Words:** Wolverhampton Transport turban dispute, British Sikhs, Enoch Powell, Immigration, Integration

## Introduction

In April 1968 Britain erupted into a tide of populist anti-immigrant sentiment when Wolverhampton MP Enoch Powell delivered his 'Rivers of Blood' speech to a Conservative Party meeting in Birmingham. Carefully timed and expertly planned to achieve maximum impact, the speech sent shockwaves through his own party, leading to his dismissal from Edward Heath's shadow cabinet, and brought the nation to its feet in support of the man widely held to be the only politician courageous enough to voice the fears of ordinary people about the social and political changes taking place in their neighbourhoods.

The story of Powell's speech is well known. Less so is the story of what precipitated it.<sup>1</sup> Few have touched upon the protracted and hard fought struggle of Sikhs in Wolverhampton to be allowed to wear the symbols of their faith while working on corporation transport, yet this was undoubtedly at the forefront of Powell's mind when he gave his explosive speech (not least because he had brought the same issue up two months before in an address at Walsall and had received hundreds of letters of support). Powell conceived of the turban dispute as communalism - the curse of India - imported to the heart of the West Midlands and tearing apart its fragile social fabric. 'Rivers of Blood' was addressed to a nation, but it was always intended to be the voice of Powell's people, those in the Black Country for whom immigrants represented threat, fear and change, and who felt they were being made strangers in their own town.

The Wolverhampton turban dispute was a 20 month period of lobbying by local Sikhs for the right to express their cultural and religious distinction at work, and included three protest marches through Wolverhampton and the threat by a local Sikh leader, Sohan Singh Jolly, to immolate himself if the

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<sup>1</sup> Two important studies have been undertaken: Beetham's comparative study of the Manchester and Wolverhampton turban disputes David Beetham, *Transport and Turbans: A Comparative Study in Local Politics* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970)., and Reeves's consideration of the dispute in the context of deteriorating race relations in Wolverhampton. Frank Reeves, *Race and Borough Politics* (Aldershot: Avebury, 1989). The present article differs by taking public discourse as its point of analysis and tracing the way local understandings of the dispute developed.

transport committee failed to reverse its policy. As the situation escalated it was nationalised through the involvement of the Indian Workers Association, central government minister David Ennals, and the Department of Transport at Whitehall, and internationalised through the involvement of the British branch of Punjabi political party *Shiromani Akali Dal*, who organised protests in Delhi, and the intervention of the Indian High Commissioner, who warned of the serious consequences in India should Jolly carry out his threat. By the time the ban was eventually reversed on 9 April 1969, it had taken on significance well beyond the original industrial dispute.

Played out against the background of the deep social and political changes of the time, the turban dispute formed a microcosm of focus for local people that pulled in a number of anxieties about the changes taking place in industrial urban Britain. As large numbers of immigrant children arrived in the town for family reunification, local concerns over the stretching of social services blended with national debates over the Race Relations Bill discrimination legislation.<sup>2</sup> Powell's 1968 speeches in the West Midlands gave a measure of legitimacy to the concerns felt by many locals that their rights were being eroded and their natural privileges denied. For Powell, as much as many of his constituents, the turban dispute was a highly visible symbol of the profound changes taking place in the country and the world, and provided a focus for deep anxieties about integration and the extent to which immigrants had to change before locals could accept them.

That such an apparently trivial matter could take on such significance makes it an important case to study. By tracing the narratives and argumentative strategies employed in letters to the editor of local newspaper *The Express and Star*, we show how the turban became a central signifier of difference in the town, forming a highly visible symbol around which a number of anxieties coalesced. Drawing on a unique data set of almost 400 letters to the newspaper, we consider the turban dispute from the perspective of correspondents to the newspaper and seek to demonstrate how these letters articulated locals' fears and anxieties at a time of social and political upheaval, and functioned as opinion making technology, wielded by writers to convince others of the correctness of their position.

The extent to which the turban dispute affected Enoch Powell and moulded his ideas before his (February) Walsall and (April) Birmingham 1968 speeches is contested. In an otherwise insightful article, which considers Powell's India experiences and the way in which ideas of communalism came to dominate his understanding of the British situation, Peter Brooke contends that the winning of the turban dispute had a huge effect on the content, tone and language of Powell's Birmingham speech. In fact, the turban dispute was not won until a year after this speech, in April 1969.<sup>3</sup> Camilla Schofield has

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<sup>2</sup> As Clifford Hill has noted, net immigration peaked in the mid-1960s due to 'beat the ban' rushes, which inflated immigration levels as those seeking to settle in the UK brought sought to beat legislation that would restrict their right to work. In 1967/8 the widely publicised introduction of controls on Kenyan Asian immigration was a major factor in the rapid increase in the number entering Britain Clifford Hill, *Immigration and Integration: A Study of the Settlement of Coloured Minorities in Britain* (Oxford: Permagon Press, 1970), 38–39.. The resulting media attention led many correspondents to the *Express and Star* to view the situation in Wolverhampton as dangerously overcrowded, which combined with fears about scarce goods and services, and the decreased share that Wulfrunians perceived they would get should immigrants continue to settle. Thirty-three per cent of the letters (129) spoke directly about scarcity, with the vast majority discussing overcrowding in both Wolverhampton and the UK more generally (45). Of the other scarcity topics addressed the most frequent were: overstretched schools (31), housing shortages (24), welfare (20) and unemployment (9).

<sup>3</sup> Brooke also mentions that the Transport Committee's assertion that it changed the rules under threat of suicide, rather than because of any merit to the cause, affected Powell as it reminded him of the situation in India following independence, and argues that this is what caused him to use such vivid and apocalyptic tone in the Birmingham speech. To be fair to Brooke, his confusion over chronology does not diminish the backbone of his

argued, contrary to Brooke, that causality may actually have been in the opposite direction, with the negative publicity received because of Powell's April 1968 speech convincing the town to bring the issue to a close and give the Sikhs the concessions they wanted.<sup>4</sup> Again this is not an entirely convincing analysis of the situation. Although the turban campaign had sporadic support from central government ministers and local MPs as early as November 1967, the issue was never debated in the council chamber and no local councillors gave support to the campaign at any time. Powell's speech did not change this at all, and the negative publicity the town received may even have entrenched attitudes for local politicians. David Beetham has argued that this was a result of continual upping of the stakes, increasing the cost to councillors of offering support and therefore forcing the Sikh campaigners to increasingly more militant action, which in turn increased the cost to councillors.<sup>5</sup> Whatever the reason, publicity around Powell's speeches had little effect on the committee's decision making process. At the meeting of the Transport Committee in February 1969 the issue was again debated, and claiming that this was its final word on the subject, the Committee stated, again, that the rule was not discriminatory and it would continue to be upheld.

The importance of Powell in the conflict is debated, what is clear, however, is that both Powell and the Transport Committee had good reason to believe that public opinion was behind them. While the letters to the *Express and Star* cannot be considered representative of public opinion, they created a community of opinion that, by virtue of being published and in print, gained some legitimacy.

### Letters to the Editor

As a form of voluntary political participation, letters to the editor (LTEs) include rich and detailed explanations of what people believe and why they believe it.<sup>6</sup> For the purposes of studying discourse on race and immigration, they provide a snapshot view of the concerns of correspondents at particular points in history, and a space where writers attempt to convince others of the rightness of their position, at the same time as constructing a community of values through a dialogical process between writers, editors and readers.<sup>7</sup> Previous research on LTEs demonstrates that newspaper editors believe they are one of the best read and most important parts of the newspaper,<sup>8</sup> and there is evidence that

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argument, which is that the situation in Wolverhampton had a huge effect on Powell and encouraged him to formulate both speeches to argue that communalism, 'the curse of India,' was being transplanted through immigration in to the heart of the Black Country. Peter Brooke, "India, Post-Imperialism and the Origins of Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' Speech," *The Historical Journal* 50, no. 3 (2007): 669–687.

<sup>4</sup> Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 219. Although Powell's speech undoubtedly contributed to the unease of national politicians and therefore, perhaps, their willingness to get involved in the campaign in the Sikh's favour, the Transport Committee continued to reaffirm their original resolution throughout the heightened publicity over Powell's speech. When eventually the ban was overturned the Committee made bitterly clear that it was Jolly's suicide threat that had forced their hand.

<sup>5</sup> Beetham, *Transport and Turbans: A Comparative Study in Local Politics*, 8.

<sup>6</sup> Christopher Cooper, H Gibbs Knotts, and Moshe Haspel, "The Content of Political Participation: Letters to the Editor and the People Who Write Them," *PS: Political Science and Politics* 42, no. 1 (2009): 131.

<sup>7</sup> As Perrin and Vaisey argue, the letters page constitutes a public sphere, one that does not simply reflect a public but actually helps produce it through a set of cultural norms and ideals. Andrew J Perrin and Stephen Vaisey, "Parallel Public Spheres: Distance and Discourse in Letters to the Editor," *American Journal of Sociology* 114, no. 3 (2008): 782.

<sup>8</sup> Cooper, Knotts, and Haspel, "The Content of Political Participation: Letters to the Editor and the People Who Write Them," 131; Ian Mayes, "Sincerely Yours: The Readers' Editor On... the Value, and the Hazards, of the Letters

politicians pay attention to their content.<sup>9</sup> As such they represent a unique source by which to measure the extent of critical debate and discussion of a particular issue generated in a locality.<sup>10</sup> LTEs can help us trace the development of opinion and the hardening of positions around an issue,<sup>11</sup> as well as the extent to which everyday racism was normalised and legitimated through inclusion in the newspaper.<sup>12</sup>

There is ample evidence that a great deal of editorial control was employed in selecting the letters for publication. *Express and Star* editor Clem Jones was an outspoken liberal on racial matters and the newspaper was in favour of regulations being altered to allow turbans and beards on buses.<sup>13</sup> The letters published by *Express and Star* on the dispute were almost exactly balanced in favour and against, despite strong evidence that the letter writing public of Wolverhampton leaned towards supporting the Transport Department's position.<sup>14</sup> Editorial interference was even more obvious during the week after Enoch Powell's Birmingham speech. Jones claimed that 'Ted Heath made a martyr out of Enoch, but as far as *Express and Star's* circulation area was concerned, virtually the whole area was determined to make a saint out of him. From the Tuesday through to the end of the week, I had 10, 15 to 20 bags full of readers' letters; 95% were pro-Enoch.'<sup>15</sup> Despite the huge support for Powell, the *Express and Star* continued to publish an almost even balance of opinions.<sup>16</sup>

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Page," *Guardian*, 23 June, 2001, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/jun/23/books.guardianreview21242>;

K. Wahl-Jorgensen, "Letters to the Editor," *Peace Review* (1999): 54.

<sup>9</sup> For example Barry Goldwater may have based his electoral platform on the conservative content of letters to the editor. Similarly, interest groups recognise the importance of letters as a low cost means of swaying politicians and public opinion by instructing members in how to write effective letters Cooper, Knotts, and Haspel, "The Content of Political Participation: Letters to the Editor and the People Who Write Them," 132.

<sup>10</sup> As Hogan notes, LTEs are of interest not because they mirror public opinion, but because they have the potential to shape popular opinion in ways that legitimate or challenge state framing of issues. J Hogan, "Letters to the Editor in the 'War on Terror': A Cross-National Study," *Mass Communication & Society* 9, no. 1 (2006): 63–64. See also: Sarah Pedersen, "The Appearance of Women's Politics in the Correspondence Pages of Aberdeen Newspapers, 1900–14," *Women's History Review* 11, no. 4 (2002): 657.

<sup>11</sup> Albert Atkin and John E Richardson, "Arguing about Muslims: (Un)Reasonable Argumentation in Letters to the Editor," *Text & Talk* 27, no. 1 (2007): 1–25; Gabrina Pounds, "Writer's Argumentative Attitude: A Contrastive Analysis of 'Letters to the Editor' in English and Italian," *Pragmatics* 15, no. 1 (2005): 49–88.

<sup>12</sup> John E. Richardson and Bob Franklin, "'Dear Editor': Race, Readers' Letters and the Local Press," *The Political Quarterly* 74, no. 2 (2003): 185.

<sup>13</sup> Reeves, *Race and Borough Politics*, 65.

<sup>14</sup> In a confidential report to the Transport Committee, dated November 1967, the Town Clerk noted that two thirds of the letters received by the council were in favour of the Committee's decision "Tramways, Later Transport Committee. WOL-C-TRA/39: Minute Book (R6) (1967 - 1969). Wolverhampton Archives and Local Studies, Wolverhampton. 20 July 2015.," 1967.

<sup>15</sup> Roy Greenslade, "When the Power of the Regional Press - and Its Editors - Meant Something," *The Guardian*, 15 August, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2013/aug/15/wolverhampton-local-newspapers>. Jones was well aware that letter writing campaigns had been initiated by the National Front, and even cautioned Powell prior to his speech about unsubstantiated rumours that had been forwarded to the paper and politicians. He said of the letters published: 'I only used letters that I was one hundred per cent sure of where they came from...' Bill Schwarz, *The White Man's World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 40.

<sup>16</sup> The level of support for Powell was high in the area. When the *Express and Star* asked its readers to vote on whether Edward Heath had been right to sack Powell from the shadow cabinet following his speech, 35,000 people took part in the vote with only 372 in favour of Heath's decision. Reeves, *Race and Borough Politics*, 112. Still, the newspaper continued to present a balanced proportion of letters in favour and opposed to Powell's position.

The determination of the *Express and Star's* editor to ensure the newspaper published a balanced picture of race related matters would suggest the level of support for the Transport Department's ban was much higher than represented in the newspaper. This, however, does not diminish the importance of the letters as a source. Rather, it points to the letters page as an important site of community construction, created through an extended written dialogue between writers, editors and readers. Correspondents to the page were mediated by the editors, who wanted to present a balanced view,<sup>17</sup> and the published letters were mediated by readers who incorporated them into general mental frameworks about race and immigration in the area.<sup>18</sup> This can be observed from the content of the letters, which employed a number of narratives and shared stories in order to argue that the dispute represented a claim for more rights for immigrants, in an already overstretched town where they were widely perceived to be receiving a better deal than Wulfrunians, whose claim on resources was greater.

The turban dispute condensed discourses of exclusion around a particular issue at a time of great social upheaval and anxiety, and the letters generated provide a snapshot view of the way dominance was articulated at this point in history. By refracting wider societal struggles and making them visible and understandable, the dispute acted as a proxy conflict through which locals could vent their feelings about immigrants and the changes they were bringing to the town.

The official support for the turban ban, from both the Transport Committee and Powell, offered a measure of legitimacy to these understandings. The discourses that emerged within the letters page gave those articulating them the illusion of control in the face of wide and deep social change. In this sense, the letters, including those supporting the Sikhs, performed an important social function for the newspapers' community. By acting as a site of community building, in which locals could 'let off steam',<sup>19</sup> the pages allowed locals to construct a bounded space in which white ethnic local identities were positioned and articulated as dominant, with the right to decide who and how many could settle in the locality and the terms of their acceptance.

## The turban dispute

On 8 August 1967, Tarsem Singh Sandhu was sent home from his job as bus conductor by Wolverhampton Transport Committee after he returned to work wearing a turban and a beard following a period of sick leave, and refused to comply with the company's dress code by removing them.

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Jones's determination to represent a balanced picture of the situation led to abusive phone calls and even his home windows being smashed. "Clem Jones," *The Telegraph*, 11 November, 2002, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1412781/Clem-Jones.html>.

<sup>17</sup> Beyond Clem Jones's insistence that he was determined to present balanced perspectives, the letters column as an arena of conflict, and therefore of high news value, points to a further reason why editors may have included an even balance of pro- and anti- turban letters. Kitty Van Vuuren et al., "Clean Energy Futures and Place-Based Responses: A Comparison of Letters-to-the-Editor in Two Australian Regions," *Communication, Politics & Culture* 47, no. 2014 (2014): 20.

<sup>18</sup> Laura M Carpenter, "Influencing Health Debates Through Letters to the Editor: The Case of Male Circumcision," *Qualitative Health Research* 19, no. 4 (2009): 519.

<sup>19</sup> The importance of letters as a safety valve has been noted by several researchers. See, for example: Pedersen, "The Appearance of Women's Politics in the Correspondence Pages of Aberdeen Newspapers, 1900–14," 666; Anne Magnet and Didier Carnet, "Letters to the Editor: Still Vigorous after All These Years? A Presentation of the Discursive and Linguistic Features of the Genre," *English for Specific Purposes* 25, no. 2 (2006): 192–193.

This was not the first time trouble had brewed between immigrant workers and the transport department. As the first Municipal Authority in the country to employ European Volunteer workers, in 1949 Wolverhampton Transport Department had 70 European workers, as well as 4 Jamaicans, and by 1955 6.5% of its 500 strong labour force was black, leading the Transport and General Workers Union to institute an overtime ban in order to press management to oppose the recruitment of any more black workers and call for a ceiling of 5%.<sup>20</sup> Frank Reeves has argued that this was a combination of economic concerns, based on the notion that black workers undermined the existing conditions of work by being prepared to work longer hours for lower pay, and status anxiety by white bus workers, who considered that the status of the work was undermined by the presence of black workers.<sup>21</sup> After eight days the ban was called off when the Labour controlled Transport Committee refused to concede to the union's demands, and by 1958 black workers made up 14-15% of the labour force in the transport department.<sup>22</sup>

Although Wolverhampton was not the first authority to experience a dispute over the right to wear turbans, it was qualitatively different to anything that had come before. A similar incident had occurred in Manchester earlier in the decade, but had been resolved through patient lobbying behind the scenes and had little of the fire and brimstone of the Wolverhampton dispute.<sup>23</sup> The *Express and Star* reported on Sandhu's dismissal immediately, interviewing Alderman Ron Gough, Conservative chair of the Transport Committee, who stated that Sandhu had signed a clause in his contract which specifically stated that no beards should be worn and that should he wish the rules to be amended he should raise the issue through the proper channels – the union. A spot-check conducted on 9 August found that the majority of those questioned did not object to turbans and beards, and the issue was irrelevant to most passengers who largely claimed that as long as they were clean, tidy and respectable and could do their job, Sikhs should be allowed to wear what they pleased.<sup>24</sup>

Appeals to the Transport and General Workers Union proved fruitless. On 10 August 1967 a statement was issued which distanced the union from the dispute: 'We cannot take sides to upset the smooth way in which people of many nations, coloured or otherwise, have been engaged and have become established bus drivers and conductors' and reiterated that the established conditions of employment were the same for everybody, citing an incident 30 years earlier when a white man had been suspended for growing a beard.<sup>25</sup> This lack of support led to a rumour that unless they were given the opportunity to discuss the regulations, 150 Sikhs in the transport department were going to set up their own union. In response, officials agreed to place the matter on the agenda of the next branch meeting and put the matter to vote. The question: 'Are you in favour of ex-driver Sandhu's request to wear a beard and turban?' returned a clear majority. Of 578 members who voted, 336 were in favour and 204 against, with 38 spoiled papers.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Reeves, *Race and Borough Politics*, 22.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 22–3.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>23</sup> For a comparison of the two, see Beetham, *Transport and Turbans: A Comparative Study in Local Politics*.

<sup>24</sup> Only two people were found to object - one on the grounds that turbans and beards were unattractive, while the other claimed 'I don't think it is right. It does not make sense. They seem out of place.' *Express and Star*, "Public Don't Object," August 9, 1967, 10.

<sup>25</sup> *Express and Star*, "Turban Row," August 10, 1967, 1; Reeves, *Race and Borough Politics*, 63–64.

<sup>26</sup> *Express and Star* (6 September 1967). The union's reluctance to get involved in the dispute likely encouraged the Transport Committee to continue to reaffirm its regulations throughout the conflict. John Kassie, liaison officer for Wolverhampton Council for Racial Harmony, later accused the union rep of diminishing the importance of the ballot, in contrast to its stated position of racial tolerance. *Express and Star*, "Beards Ban Stays... New Storm,"

The Transport Committee met on 8 November to discuss the union petition that uniform regulations be amended, and reiterated their former decision, that ‘the existing conditions of service of employees of the Transport Undertaking, which are applicable to all employees without exception, be continued.’<sup>27</sup> Thus began a cycle of Sikh petitions and Transport Committee reaffirmations of policy that was to last for almost two years.

On 29 November 1967 a confidential report by the Town Clerk, entitled ‘Sikhs – Turbans and Beards’, was presented to the committee. Noting the growing publicity on the issue, as well as a number of letters received by the Mayor, the Chairman of the Transport Committee, the Transport General Manager and the Town Clerk, the document reported on the content of these letters, as well as findings from other transport authorities.

Relating the findings gathered from authorities that did permit turbans and beards on duty, the report conveyed that of 3898 employed at Birmingham, none took advantage of the ruling. Coventry, whose total employees was not stated included 2 wearing turbans, while of Manchester’s 3707 employees, including 5 Sikhs, only one employee wore the turban. In conclusion, the report stated:

In view of the amount of publicity and interest which this matter has raised the Committee may wish to re-affirm their previous decision in a resolution incorporating the reasons for the decision as follows:- That because the existing conditions of employment are applicable to all employees regardless of race or religion and cannot be construed as discriminatory of any particular group, resolution 90 of this Committee be re-affirmed.<sup>28</sup>

Given the overall leaning within the report towards allowing turbans, the final recommendation is somewhat odd. Despite the letters from public figures expressing unease at the implications the decision would have on race relations in the town, the union ballot in which a clear majority had voted to overturn the ban, and the evidence from other authorities which clearly demonstrated that few took advantage of altered regulations in the turban’s favour, the Town Clerk still recommended reaffirmation of the previous resolution.

This suggests that the Committee was sincerely committed to the abstract liberal position that ‘the rules’ were the same for everybody and could not therefore be reasonably considered discriminatory. To amend them would be to invite accusations of giving special treatment to a particular racial or religious group, and would potentially fall foul of the upcoming Race Relations Act. Abstract liberalism, in this context, provided a means of negotiating competing cultural or racial demands by remaining

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November 9, 1967. Such ambivalence on matters of racial discrimination was rife at the time. As Steven Fielding has argued, the vast majority of union members, including those professing socialist positions, viewed union membership in instrumental terms rather than as a force for social change, and, when faced with the large scale immigration, viewed it as threatening working class living standards and depressing wages. Steven Fielding, “Brotherhood and the Brothers: Responses to ‘coloured’ Immigration in the British Labour Party C. 1951–1965,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 3, no. 1 (1998): 85. See also Feldman’s discussion of the importance of universality in British Labour politics David Feldman, “Why the English like Turbans,” in *Structures and Transformations in Modern British History*, ed. David Feldman and Jon Lawrence (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 286–288.

<sup>27</sup> “Tramways, Later Transport Committee. WOL-C-TRA/39: Minute Book (R6) (1967 - 1969). Wolverhampton Archives and Local Studies, Wolverhampton. 20 July 2015.” The report also noted that interest in this matter had been expressed by the Indian High Commission Office in Birmingham and that, although the Assistant High Commissioner had requested an interview with the Mayor, he had indicated he would be satisfied with a letter setting out the history and facts of the case and the reason for the committee’s decision

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.



ostensibly committed to equality.<sup>29</sup> In this case the rules on headwear and beards had sufficed for decades and amendment was not only considered unnecessary, but also potentially destabilising for the fragile racial equilibrium being tentatively established in the town. This remained the transport committee's position throughout the dispute, and the evidence suggests that the committee concluded that steadfast and unwavering commitment would eventually wear down the Sikh's will to fight. But it also seems clear that it was based on a genuine belief that this was the best way to deal with the demands being made. Despite continuing petitions and escalations by Sikhs, this remained the Committee's position until the very end of the conflict, when Jolly's suicide threat, imminent handover to the Passenger Authority and pressure from Government ministers and the Indian High Commissioner forced the Committee to begrudgingly and bitterly overturn its decision. Of six Transport Committee meetings convened to discuss the issue in the period August 1967-April 1969 prior to the overturning, all concluded with recommendations to reaffirm the resolution.<sup>30</sup> On 4 February 1968 a demonstration was held in Wolverhampton, when 5000-6000 Sikhs, along with a small group of Christians and a few left-wing groups, marched through Wolverhampton to the town hall in order to deliver a letter protesting Sandhu's dismissal and requesting a change in the Transport Department's regulations. The lack of sympathy among Wolverhampton's political establishment for the Sikh cause was demonstrated by the fact that not one member of the council was at the town hall to receive the letter, which had to instead be handed to a secretary.<sup>32</sup>

Support for Sikhs within the letters page coalesced around the notion that the beard and turban were sacred. Those arguing from this perspective were largely figures within the local religious establishment, including several Sikhs who were heavily involved in the campaign. The motif of religious freedom was important and remained so throughout the conflict, changing little over two years, yet this position was not articulated with the force that it perhaps deserved. Incorporating notions of British tolerance and the history of struggles for religious freedom was not a priority for the writers, although this was potentially a narrative that could have had a great deal of force. Those who supported the Sikh struggle reiterated that the turban and beard were 'the most fundamental part of the Sikh religion'<sup>33</sup> and 'not just a 'fashion turned into tradition' but are the basis of his spiritual strength.'<sup>34</sup>

By far the most popular narrative in support of the Sikhs emphasised that the armed forces permitted beards and turbans, and so '[w]hat is good enough for the Royal Navy ought to be good enough for Wolverhampton Corporation.'<sup>35</sup> This storyline invoked personal testimonies which attested to the character of Sikhs: 'I well remember during the war when Sikh troops were captured by the Italians in Abyssinia They were shaved and sent back to their own lines. Many of them shot themselves

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<sup>29</sup> As Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has noted, this framing of racial issues in the language of liberalism allows whites to appear reasonable while opposing practical approaches to deal with de facto inequality. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, "Racial Attitudes or Racial Ideology? An Alternative Paradigm for Examining Actors' Racial Views," *Journal of Political Ideologies* 8, no. 1 (2003): 69. Bonilla-Silva traced the development of this narrative in the US to the late 1960s in America, when the gains of the civil rights movement made overt racist rhetoric less socially acceptable and forced those who sought to oppose racial justice to use apparently liberal frames of 'equality for all' in order to protect spaces from affirmative action claims. Much of the evidence from the turban dispute suggests that similar rhetorical moves were being established in the UK as well.

<sup>30</sup> "Tramways, Later Transport Committee. WOL-C-TRA/39: Minute Book (R6) (1967 - 1969). Wolverhampton Archives and Local Studies, Wolverhampton. 20 July 2015."

<sup>32</sup> Reeves, *Race and Borough Politics*, 70.

<sup>33</sup> CS Panchhi, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, September 12, 1967.

<sup>34</sup> WS Khorana, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, February 7, 1969.

<sup>35</sup> BH, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, November 16, 1967.

rather than face their comrades. The transport committee wish to inflict the same indignity on them.<sup>36</sup> Testimonies in this context emphasised their authors' first-hand knowledge of Sikhs, usually gained while fighting alongside them during the Second World War: 'Thousands of Sikhs died for this country in wartime. Before they went into battle they were not ordered to shave and if their turbans were removed they were replaced by steel helmets. I soldiered alongside these men and found them proud, brave, clean and reliable.'<sup>37</sup>

These narratives support, to some extent, David Feldman's analysis of English reactions to turban claims as easily enfolded within discourses of empire and tolerance. Feldman discusses a number of Sikh petitions for the right to wear a turban and argues that their consistent victories signal a history of pluralism that formed part of the British reaction to immigration in the 1960/70s and that this stands in apparent contrast to the widely held belief that Britain at this time was conceived as a homogenously white nation.<sup>38</sup> Feldman discusses a longer, and a more national, history, and he is centrally concerned with the discourses (of empire and toleration) that powerful elites used to articulate support for Sikhs. For this reason his analysis tends to gloss over the very real resistance to change that was evident in the Wolverhampton case. For example, Feldman's explanation for the successive Sikh victories points partly to the actions of Sikh campaigners, and particularly that they managed to obscure the fact that many Sikhs had abandoned the turban and beard in English society.<sup>39</sup> The correspondents, however, were keenly aware of this fact and it formed the root of the narrative that Sikhs, who had been content to work according to the customs of the land until this point, had started to demand more rights that they were entitled to. For example, CS Panchi, at this point the campaign leader, attempted to establish this storyline from the start of the campaign, and wrote in September 1967 that 'The beard and turban is the most fundamental part of the Sikh religion. A Sikh's religion is not complete without it.'<sup>40</sup> Correspondents, however, immediately contested this assertion, using their own local knowledge to argue that the Sikhs they lived and worked with had previously been content to accept the customs of the land and were now demanding special treatment, which many in the locality were not willing to grant.

What is perhaps most striking about these testimonies is that in the two years under study, Sikhs represented the only portion of immigrants that were ever the subject of positive testimonies.<sup>41</sup> When

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<sup>36</sup> A Beddows, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, February 14, 1968.

<sup>37</sup> HS Short, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, February 6, 1968.

<sup>38</sup> Feldman, "Why the English like Turban," 283.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 288.

<sup>40</sup> Panchhi, "Letter to the Editor."

<sup>41</sup> Few other 'immigrants' were spoken about directly. Jamaicans, for example, were only mentioned in two of the 393 letters, the Irish in three and Italians in two, and only one of these letters commented on the characteristics of the people they discussed ('Miss Maisie Wood says no one in their right mind can pretend they are overjoyed to rub shoulders with Jamaicans. I am in my right mind. I fought by the side of them in France 1915-1918 to save Britain. I remember the kind nurses and doctors (coloured) while in New Cross hospital; they gave me back my health.' S Hargreaves, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, April 27, 1968.) This stands in marked contrast to the letters about 'immigrants' in general, which consistently employed personal testimonies about their (negative) characteristics and the detrimental effect their presence had on the town. For example: 'Let me quote an instance where our foreign friends are taking over. I was told I could not be admitted to a Wolverhampton hospital to have my first child as no beds were available, because the black community live in such conditions that doctors and midwives refuse to enter their dwellings. The hospital service is one my husband contributes to but it appears not for his own wife to have any benefits but for the parasites we are helping to support.' Mrs Hilton, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, April 26, 1968. Also: 'The Midlands are already bursting at the seams; one can see whole areas where coloured immigrants are taking over - areas which a few years ago were good class property now due

placed in to the larger corpus of letters on immigrants in general, Sikhs emerge as the only group who were spoken about positively with any frequency. All other testimonies to the character and behaviour of immigrants were negative – to do with their laziness, dirtiness, noisy parties, etc.<sup>42</sup> This offers some clues as to why the turban dispute may have gained such momentum. Those employing these kinds of arguments were not ‘racial progressives’, they were merely using stories and testimony to bolster their arguments concerning the acceptability of beards and turbans on buses – a rule change that required no real adjustment for locals except in attitude.

The reaction among locals to the demonstration has been characterised by Frank Reeves as ‘chauvinistic intolerance’,<sup>43</sup> which was certainly in abundance, but what is most striking from the letters is the way the demonstration was constructed as an affront to British values. Not one of the writers considered the demonstration a healthy expression of democratic protest. Instead, it was understood as an attempt at intimidation and proof that Sikhs were determined not to integrate or conform with the way of life of the town or the nation: ‘I hope Wolverhampton transport committee will not allow themselves to be intimidated by the show of strength put on by the Sikhs on February 4’;<sup>44</sup> ‘The recent Sikh demonstration shows how determined these people are not to conform with our customs and way of life, or indeed with our regulations.’<sup>45</sup>

Having instituted a dichotomy between Sikh demands and the colour blind regulations, these positions became so entrenched that events could not destabilise them. As long as the march was understood as an attempt at intimidation, the Transport Department bore no pressure to consider it an expression of democratic unrest and the strength of Sikh feelings. Still less was it understood as a form of protest that had a long history in Britain and thus an expression of those British values that correspondents were so adamant the immigrants knew nothing about.<sup>46</sup>

On 9 February 1968, Enoch Powell addressed Walsall South Conservative Association and finally made his views on the Sikh campaign public. He had resisted involvement at the start of the conflict, after being approached by local Sikhs, including the Wolverhampton branch of the Indian Workers Association, stating that the issue was between the union and the transport department. In Walsall, however, he formulated the issue as a larger problem of communalism, the ‘curse of India.’ Referring to the February demonstration, Powell claimed:

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for demolition ten to 15 years before it otherwise would have been.’ R Williamson, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, April 24, 1968.

<sup>42</sup> At this time, ‘immigrants’ was the term most frequently used by correspondents to refer to non-white presence in the town, and discussions of the ‘immigrant problem’ were overwhelmingly negative. There was little attempt to distinguish between immigrants arriving from different countries, or with different religions and cultures, except in the case of the Sikhs. This might have been because the turban issue forced locals to focus on Sikhs, learn more about them and differentiate them from other immigrants. Equally it may have been because of the very visible difference of (orthodox) Sikhs, which locals learned to distinguish.

<sup>43</sup> Reeves, *Race and Borough Politics*, 70.

<sup>44</sup> A. Jennings, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, February 14, 1968.

<sup>45</sup> J Jones, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, February 10, 1968.

<sup>46</sup> Some of the correspondents understood this protest as a warning of what was to come in the town, interpreting it in the context of race riots in the US and elsewhere. This seems strange, since the protest was quite deliberately intended to be a solemn and controlled affair. Yet despite the clear differences between the silent Sikh march through Wolverhampton and the violence of civil rights protests in America, it was fitted to a mental model of ‘race’ protests and understood as a deeply disturbing sign of the future of the town.

Large numbers of Sikhs, who had been serving the Wolverhampton Corporation voluntarily and contentedly, have found themselves against their will made the material for communal agitation. They have the same right as anyone else to decide which if any of the rules of their sect they will keep, and they had found no difficulty in entering the Corporation's employment and complying with the same rules as their fellow employees. For those who took a different and a stricter view there were plenty of other opportunities of employment. It will be the opposite to the equal treatment of all persons within the realm if employers are placed in the position of adjudicating upon the requirements of their employees' religion. The issue in this instance, is not racial or religious discrimination: it is communalism.<sup>47</sup>

The concept of communalism was not easily transplanted in to the ideological understanding of the turban dispute for *Express and Star* correspondents, but the abstract liberal trope was readily received.. As the Town Clerk's report and the minutes of subsequent Transport Committee meetings demonstrate, it was the understanding that the uniform regulations were not discriminatory that gave the committee the confidence to keep reaffirming its decision even as the Race Relations Bill was debated throughout 1968.

In July 1967 the Home Affairs Committee had approved in outline proposals for legislation to strengthen the Race Relations Act 1965. The new Bill sought to make discrimination on racial grounds unlawful in public places, in the disposal of public property and in employment or trade union activities. The leaders of the turban campaign believed their dispute would be covered under the new Race Relations legislation, not least because David Ennals had stated in a June 1968 letter to the Sikh central committee that he would 'specifically ask the race relations board to investigate cases where Sikhs encounter difficulty in obtaining employment because of the beard and turban ... I shall make it clear at a suitable opportunity in committee that we will expect the board to take up such cases.'<sup>48</sup> When the Bill became law on 29 November 1968, five turbaned Sikhs applied to Wolverhampton Transport Department and all were refused employment. Having appealed to the newly created Race Relations Board to intervene, Panchhi was informed that since the turban rule was not discriminatory based on race, colour or national origin, the matter was outside its jurisdiction.

The abstract liberal position, that the regulations were 'colour blind' and therefore not discriminatory, offered an apparently unassailable position that even the Race Relations Act could not destabilise. As several correspondents noted the 'matter of dress regulations is not in any way racial discrimination, nor is it a regulation designed to upset race relations.'<sup>49</sup> As long as the rule applied to all, so the argument went, it could not be construed as discrimination: 'If the rule was in operation before Sikhs were employed it is obvious there is no discrimination of race, colour or creed and it applies to everyone.'<sup>50</sup>

The Race Relations Act, brought into sharp focus by the turban dispute, was understood as a 'reverse colour bar', and proof that whites were losing their rights.<sup>51</sup> As one correspondent noted 'I'm a white person and I have been out of work for 20 months. I can't get a job anywhere. I've long hair and a beard. Perhaps it would be a good idea to have a race relations board for white people.'<sup>52</sup> Although Powell

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<sup>47</sup> Enoch Powell, "Speech at Walsall, 9 February 1968," 1968, <http://www.enochpowell.net/fr-80.html>.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Beetham, *Transport and Turbans: A Comparative Study in Local Politics*, 59.

<sup>49</sup> D Hickinbottom, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, November 16, 1967.

<sup>50</sup> Still British, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, November 16, 1967.

<sup>51</sup> 'Discrimination is the natural reaction to a denial of our democratic right to decide the issue [of immigration] via the ballot box.' Discriminator, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, February 14, 1968.

<sup>52</sup> John Jarvis, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, January 29, 1969.

popularised and legitimised these narratives, they were in place long before he made his high profile speeches. In October 1967, for example, one correspondent argued: ‘...we are rapidly approaching a state where the white man will lose his freedom of speech and choice. The newer racial laws are a wonderful example of discrimination - against the white man's freedom of speech!’<sup>53</sup> For these people the comforting narrative that ‘the rules’ were sacred regardless of colour or religion, backed up by both the Transport Committee and the Race Relations Board, anchored their sense of unease over the changes taking place in their town and the country.

What is most interesting about this narrative is the way it gave way to wider concerns about gains made by minorities and their effect on the white ‘host’ population. Correspondents consistently reiterated that the rules were the rules, and those who didn’t wish to abide by them were under no obligation to remain: ‘Those who do not care for the conditions of employment laid down by the transport department can leave at any time.’<sup>54</sup> The sanctity of the beard and turban to Sikhs was met with an equally tenacious hold on the sanctity of ‘our rules’, and the drawing of equivalence between these demonstrates the anxiety with which the Sikh push for rights was greeted in Wolverhampton.

Responding to assertions that the turban and beard were sacred, correspondents argued that Sikhism in fact did not require its adherents to wear turbans and beards: ‘... only a razor-sharp quoit concealed in the long hair beneath the turban is of any religious significance...’<sup>55</sup> or that other religious traditions were not followed in England, so why should these be? Narratives such as this placed in doubt the idea that allowing beards and turbans was a small concession, and not only served to argue that Sikhs followed the rules when it suited them (‘As Mr Tarsem Singh Sandhu’s religion makes a beard and turban obligatory, why did he discard them in the first place...?’<sup>56</sup>) but that, should this concession be granted, more demands would follow.: ‘... their religion stipulates that they must carry a dagger. Do their supporters wish them to carry these weapons? Shall we be accused of religious persecution if we forbid it?’<sup>57</sup>

Powell’s Walsall speech had incorporated frames of local knowledge, which positioned the Black Country as bearing the brunt of the immigrant crisis and exploited working class narratives of being left to deal with the problems created by a distant liberal elite who had dumped the immigrants in communities that could not support them, and failed to provide financial or infrastructural support. This drew upon highly popular shared narratives of scarcity and unfair treatment.<sup>58</sup> The housing situation in Wolverhampton at the time was dire, with social housing subject to intense competition and private lettings in poor states of repair. Overcrowding, particularly among immigrants, was widespread and the sense of scarcity of decent homes for working class people exacerbated the competition for resources

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<sup>53</sup> Leslie F. Woodcock, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, October 9, 1967.

<sup>54</sup> R. Baggott, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, November 16, 1967. And: ‘Surely, if this man insists on sporting his beard and turban, why not simply find a new job where there is no objection to them?’

<sup>55</sup> JF Parker, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, January 30, 1969.

<sup>56</sup> F Beamand, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, September 11, 1967.

<sup>57</sup> Veritas, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, February 14, 1968.

<sup>58</sup> The lack of school places for migrant children was highly visible to correspondents, who complained of overcrowding and racial outnumbering. The ‘only white child in the school’ narrative was mentioned in Powell’s April 1968 speech in Birmingham. Although the *Express and Star* could find neither the child nor the school he referred to, the reality of this claim was hardly relevant to many *E&S* readers. Correspondents had been discussing the racial imbalance of schools from as early as spring 1967: ‘My own child was refused entry at a school. I took my complaint of ‘discrimination in reverse’ to my MP and my son started nursery class on April 24, two weeks after term started, making six white children in a class of 25.’ J Hilton, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, May 1, 1967.

that gave this narrative of unfairness its particularly local form and flavour.<sup>59</sup> As a letter from local councillor Frank Wandsworth demonstrates, these narratives depended on the notion that immigrants were not only receiving a better deal in comparison to whites, but also that they detrimentally affected the neighbourhoods they moved in to:

SIR – I support Enoch Powell’s call for a total ban on immigration. In the ward I represent, where property generally is good and averaged around £3750, residents live in fear of coloured purchase and consequent devaluation as houses come up for sale. As the influx goes on residents ask me what they can do. Having lived and toured a great deal in the Middle East, Africa and Asia I speak with experience and tell them the facts:- “There is nothing you can do, these people will get rich, they will move into the area in ever-increasing numbers to become a flood which will eventually overrun you. Your whole way of life will change, from a quite respectable residential suburb you will be living in a black slum unless you can afford to buy your way out into the £8000 class of property.” ... If this evil system of the Government’s known as integration is allowed to continue trouble as in the USA will certainly follow. The immigrant is here to stay and there is a solution.<sup>60</sup>

The despair evident in this extract was shared by a large number of correspondents, particularly in relation to social services, which were perceived as stretched to breaking point. The arrival of large numbers of immigrant children, whose English was often poor and who required extra help to reach the level of their peers, was certainly problematic for the local education authority. Correspondents, however, largely understood efforts to solve this as demonstrating preferential treatment, and ‘our’ children as suffering ‘reverse discrimination’ as a result.<sup>61</sup> After Powell’s Birmingham speech legitimised this narrative, correspondents became increasingly bitter. As one put it: ‘The benefits of our welfare state, for [which] we have all so dearly paid through compulsory stoppages from our wage packets, are no longer to be used for our old age pensioners and our sick and disabled workers. They are to be squandered on a thankless crowd of workshy malingerers and their countless dependents in order that a few ‘do-gooders’ from each of the three major political parties may have their consciences satisfied.’<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> In their 1978 study, Eames and Robboy noted that a number of stereotypes about Indians had developed and become entrenched in Wolverhampton, which particularly focused on scarcity discourse and included common-sense narratives that Indian willingness to work overtime kept wages down, while overcrowding of houses devalued other properties in areas of high Indian concentration, and remittance to families abroad drained wealth out of the British economy. Edwin Eames and Howard Robboy, “The Wulfranian and the Punjabi: Conflict, Identity and Adaptation,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 51, no. 4 (1978): 208–210.

<sup>60</sup> Frank Wandsworth, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, April 23, 1968. Wandsworth’s letter ends there and what this ‘solution’ might be is not made clear. Given his support for Powell, it appears he is referring to a ban on immigration and perhaps voluntary repatriation, however the vague and abrupt ending to his letter shares features with many others in this corpus, which often include provocative and unclear prescriptions for action that seem to rely on the understanding that readers share the unspoken assumptions of the writer and can read between the lines of what is being conveyed.

<sup>61</sup> For example, as one woman wrote: ‘In the current publicity on racial discrimination, no mention is made of the racial discrimination in reverse, so evident in education. In order to send my children to the infant school of my choice, I was compelled to move house four years ago. If I had been born in Jamaica or Pakistan my children would now have free transport to the same school from the other side of Wolverhampton! Special teachers teach small groups, not of English children who need extra help and tuition, to immigrant children who have little basic knowledge of English or our social customs.’ English Wulfranian, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, April 22, 1967.

<sup>62</sup> L J Eades, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, April 2, 1968. The racialised nature of these complaints bears further scrutiny. As Hill has argued, immigration was viewed as out of control at this time, yet new commonwealth (i.e. ‘coloured’) made up only 31 per cent of all immigration in 1967. In addition, net migration was outward at this

These narratives of unfair treatment similarly coalesced around the turban dispute, with people interpreting it as contrary to their understanding of integration. The increased visibility of immigrants in Wolverhampton challenged notions of assimilation as a process of merging into the local community, and the turban dispute was interpreted in this context as a demand for more rights than the locality was willing to recognise. It also led to several letters being published which asked ‘what about us?’ Correspondents questioned why they had to suffer in order that immigrants could live in the area and drew upon a discourse of white victimhood in order to claim that the turban represented a threat to them. As one correspondent claimed, ‘If turbans are allowed this is a colour bar in reverse,’<sup>63</sup> and, more forcefully, ‘It is about time the British people got together and demanded that Mr Ennals should do something for us. If he lets many more into this little island of ours it is going to sink from turbans and beards.’<sup>64</sup>

By placing ‘the rules’, and their sanctity at the centre of the conflict, correspondents not only affirmed the Transport Department’s right to uphold its uniform regulations, but were also able to use the dispute as a locus from which to make larger points about the unwillingness of immigrants to conform to local habits and lifestyle, compared with the tolerance and hospitality of locals. As one writer stated, ‘I am a merchant Navy officer and wherever I go must abide by the law of any country I visit. So why should Wolverhampton transport committee change the rules and regulations for a few Sikhs?’<sup>65</sup> Another claimed: ‘I attempted to go inside one of their temples but was politely told I must take off my shoes, etc. to conform to their rules. Is there any difference?’<sup>66</sup>

Powell’s April speech was a key national event, and *The Express and Star* encouraged local comment, receiving such a high volume of correspondence that a dedicated post room had to be created and several extra staff appointed to sort through it. The newspaper devoted a double page spread for letters for the entire week after Powell’s Birmingham speech. Yet of these hundreds of published letters, only one discussed the turban dispute.

One reason for this may be that the dispute diminished in importance for writers in the immediate aftermath of Powell’s speech, when the impact of the speech led to writers concentrating on addressing their support, or lack of it, to Powell’s position rather than extending their reasoning to include the turban issue. The large volume of correspondence also points to the likelihood of letters being clipped and shortened to remove superfluous commentary in order to include as many as possible on the extended letters page. The newspaper made clear that only a week would be dedicated to letters received on Powell, and is highly likely that off-topic letters were discarded or trimmed for inclusion. Nevertheless, it is striking that a speech by a local MP, that aroused so much interest in the locality and caused huge national ripples, and which had actually referenced the turban dispute itself did not lead to more letters published by the newspaper on this issue.

The frames employed by correspondents immediately following Powell’s speech, however, drew upon narratives that had direct relevance to the turban dispute, including tropes emphasising that it was not

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point. What made the situation so apparently hopeless to Wulfrunians was the perception that ‘coloured’ migration was permanent. In 1967, 64, 637 new commonwealth immigrants arrived in the UK. Of these only 4716 were work voucher holders, the other 50,083 being dependents. Hill, *Immigration and Integration: A Study of the Settlement of Coloured Minorities in Britain*, 27–33.

<sup>63</sup> Cosmos, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, November 16, 1967.

<sup>64</sup> LG Cooper, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, February 14, 1968.

<sup>65</sup> Capt. AE Evans, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, September 2, 1968.

<sup>66</sup> S Bill, “Letter to the Editor,” *Express and Star*, January 15, 1969.

colour but behaviour that led to (natural) discrimination, that immigrants refused to integrate, and that the Race Relations Bill was 'reverse discrimination' that would deny people their freedoms.<sup>67</sup>

The steps towards closure of the issue began in January 1969 when Sohan Singh Jolly threatened to commit suicide on Sikh new year (13 April) if the ban was not lifted.<sup>68</sup> Claiming that he had to set an example to Sikhs not to give up their religion and stir up the conscience of the English, Jolly expressed his exasperation in an interview with the *Express and Star*, 'I have tried every way to make the government and the people at Wolverhampton understand. Now I feel hopeless. This is what I must do. I do not consider it suicide. It will be a sacrifice...'<sup>69</sup>

Jolly's escalation led to the involvement of the Indian High Commissioner, Shanti Sarup Dhawan, who met the transport committee on 29 January 1969 and appealed to the Department of Transport in Whitehall, warning of the wide ramifications a suicide could have in India.<sup>70</sup> Thousands had already marched in Delhi against the ban, and handed a petition to the British consulate in India.<sup>71</sup> The Transport Committee was indignant at what it perceived as blackmail, and pointed out that such a threat was hardly worthwhile when power would be handed over in June of that year to the newly created West Midlands Passenger Transport Authority, whose chair had publicly declared himself in favour of lifting the ban. Attempts by local Sikhs to dissuade Jolly proved fruitless and on 9 April the Transport Committee agreed to meet to discuss the matter once more, deliberating for three hours before reluctantly agreeing to relax the ban, although making it clear that the decision had been reached under duress. The leader of the committee stated: '...as men of honour, we have been forced to have regard to the wider implications... we have been pressured by the wider implications of this, of the implications both at home and abroad, if he had carried out his threat'<sup>72</sup>. Former Wolverhampton Labour Councillor Arthur Morey stated that the decision was 'anarchy for the few':

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<sup>67</sup> For example: 'We in the Young Conservatives do not discriminate by colour but rather by behaviour. The vast majority of immigrants make no effort to become accustomed to the British way of life, so it seems we must either tolerate their noise and nuisance or risk prosecution. Some immigrants are fine people, but there is a world of difference between the odd coloured doctor and the tribes turning the streets of our large towns into ghettos.' Paul Andrews, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, April 26, 1968. ; 'If the Race Relations Bill becomes law the myth that England is a free country with free speech will be well and truly killed' W Antill, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, April 25, 1968.; 'Our white women who want to go into hospital to have their babies have difficulty in getting in as so many coloured women are occupying beds This is caused by their doctors refusing to deliver the babies in their own homes because of the state they live in. I know some of them are decent and quite friendly, but many are trouble - makers. Most of them do not want to integrate with us but carry on their old way of living in squalor.' LJ Walker, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, April 25, 1968.

<sup>68</sup> Jolly had been involved with the campaign from the beginning but leadership had passed to him from CS Panchhi after the failure of the attempt to have Wolverhampton Transport prosecuted under the Race Relations Act. At the same time Jolly had been elected as president of UK branch of *Shiromani Akali Dal*. Panchhi went on to campaign for a separate Sikh state (Khalistan) in Punjab, claiming that his experience of the turban dispute had convinced him that the Sikhs would not be protected without a state to support diplomatic sanctions. Panchhi claimed: 'he had seen through Indian ambassadors' lip-service to the Sikhs' legitimate demand and felt unless the community had a sovereign government with its own diplomats, overseas Sikhs would always remain vulnerable'. Quoted in Gurharpal Singh, "British Multiculturalism and Sikhs," *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 1, no. 2 (2005): 172.

<sup>69</sup> Roy Coates, "Sacrifice, Not Suicide," *Express and Star*, January 11, 1969.

<sup>70</sup> Gurphal Singh and Darsham Singh Tatla, *Sikhs in Britain: The Making of a Community* (Zed Books, 2006), 128.

<sup>71</sup> Darshan S Tatla, "The Unbearable Lightness of Diasporic Sikh Nationalism! From Anguished Cries of 'Khalistan' to Pleas for 'Recognition,'" *Sikh Formations: Religion, Culture, Theory* 8, no. 1 (2012): 81.

<sup>72</sup> David Bell, "So It's Turbans on - and Sikhs Jubilant at Victory," *Express and Star*, April 10, 1969.



'The[re] are other religious organisations besides the Sikhs who subordinate themselves to the conditions of employment in this county. The Sikhs think they can impose their beliefs on this society by threatening to indulge in self-sacrifice.'<sup>73</sup>

Having placed such faith in the abstract liberal position that the rules were colour blind, the reversal of policy was experienced by correspondents both as a betrayal and a racialised defeat: 'What a pitiful climb down by the transport committee. How the coloured folk must be laughing at the way the whites give way'.<sup>74</sup> Linking the Sikh victory with national decline and reverse discrimination, the bitterness evident in the committee's decision was reflected in the letters page: 'We wish to place on record our utter disgust at the way pressure has been brought to bear on Wolverhampton Transport Committee to make them discriminate against other nationals in favour of a tiny minority of Sikh bus conductors. Our modern civilisation is being put back 500 years by giving way to this pressure group. Talk of integration is such a load of nonsense while such goings on occur...'<sup>75</sup>

Such attitudes can only be understood in the context of the larger changes taking place in Wolverhampton and the enfolding of the turban dispute in to a public understanding that the presence of immigrants had a negative effect on the life of the locality. As Gough stated after the ban was revoked: 'The ordinary man in the street feels that this is an encroachment on his way of life...'<sup>76</sup> There can be little doubt that the turban dispute was only able to gain such symbolic importance because of the community making function of the letters page. An industrial dispute that was largely irrelevant to the bus crews<sup>77</sup> could never have taken on the significance it did had locals not been given an opportunity to participate in the construction of their community, through the exchange of ideas and discourses which enabled them to imagine themselves as having a stake in the dispute. Providing a space where these interpretations and racialised understandings were shared, rearticulated and built upon, the letters page facilitated the construction of writers and readers as part of an embattled white community, fighting for their own customs, traditions and way of life in the face of consistent immigrant encroachments.

## Conclusion

An examination of the discourses of the turban dispute offers an important and hitherto unexamined insight in to the complex understandings that circulated in Wolverhampton during a time of social and political change. Although the short time frame examined here offers only a snapshot, it does lend credence to Enoch Powell's assertion that immigration was a constant theme on the lips of his constituents. Those who wrote these letters were not necessarily representative of Wolverhampton, but what the collected narratives demonstrate is a form of community building, where the dialogue between writers, editors and readers, made the *Express and Star* letters page a constructed home. The uniform tone and style of the letters (formal, polite, terse) constructed the column in such a way that, reading it almost fifty years later, the extended conversation that emerges has the feel of a family

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<sup>73</sup> *Express and Star*, "Mixed Feelings over Turbans," April 10, 1969.

<sup>74</sup> L Crump, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, April 12, 1969.

<sup>75</sup> GCG and 53 other signatories, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, April 18, 1969.

<sup>76</sup> *Express and Star*, "Many Attack Lifting of the Turbans Ban," April 11, 1969.

<sup>77</sup> Reeves has noted that the majority of busmen never wore their caps, despite the rule. Reeves, *Race and Borough Politics*, 3. Asked to comment on the views of bus crews to the decision to overturn the ban on turbans, a transport department spokesman said 'I don't think the crews could care less about it'. *Express and Star*, "Mixed Feelings over Turbans."

disagreement at the dinner table. The fact that these private and personal thoughts would be available publicly, for all in the locality to view (and most letters were signed and therefore attributable), did not deter correspondents from being remarkably frank with their views.

It is this richness and openness that makes letters columns so important to understanding the everyday concerns, hopes and fears of people at particular points in history. The act of contributing to a newspaper through LTEs is a specific form of community building, distinct from that done through institutions such as churches and unions because its focus is not restricted by the aims of the organisation. Letters pages are constructed, and understood, as a democratic space where contributors are invited to set the agenda and all are entitled to an equal hearing. In this sense, the column represents an attempt by editors, writers and readers to create a public sphere and build an imagined local community.<sup>78</sup> This is demonstrated by the personal testimonies employed by many of the correspondents. Writers brought their own individual experiences to bear on the political issue in question and used these to claim wider points about the integration of minorities. Indeed, one of the most often repeated refrains was that local people intimately understood the difficulties of absorbing vast numbers of immigrants, that Wolverhampton's situation was unique, and that well-meaning outsiders (do-gooders) had no idea of the pressure that the local community was under. The consistent recurrence of these narratives, the similar frames they employed, and the way that new events were enfolded in to this discourse indicates that these stories were being widely repeated in everyday life. The symbolic nature of the dispute further emphasises this point. For white Wulfrunians there were no economic or social consequences involved in the question of whether Sikhs wore turbans on buses or not. It made no difference to the running of the transport system and involved no sharing of scarce resources. The conflict was entirely symbolic, and perhaps because of this, took on significance far beyond its original referents. Locals could enter the debate without cost to themselves and stake out extreme positions simply because these positions had little consequence to them. As the dispute rumbled on it became about Wulfrunian's right to decide the level of change they would accept, and local focus fell upon the symbol of the turban probably because of the perception that this was one fight they might win. The Transport Committee's unwavering commitment to the abstract liberal position that everyone in the department was subject to the same regulations, regardless of race or faith, gave correspondents a firm support to hold on to at a time when they felt their concerns and fears about the changes taking place in the town were overwhelmingly ignored. But the insistence that the regulations were colour-blind was insufficient to deal with the dispute. Not only did it privilege those who had no desire to amend the regulations to allow turbans, and thus uphold the status quo, but it also failed to deal with the central issue on which the dispute turned: difference. Sikh campaigners were not questioning whether the rules as they stood were equally applied to every worker, they were asking that the rules be amended to incorporate difference. Asserting that the regulations were indifferent to race and faith was therefore irrelevant, since the entire dispute was precisely about recognising this difference.

As a community making technology, the letters column served a different purpose to, for example, the letters personally written to Powell and analysed by Amy Whipple. While the latter incorporated many of the tropes that appeared in the *Express and Star*, they were confessional in tone, and provided Powell's supporters with an emotional outlet and an opportunity to express their concerns without judgment.<sup>79</sup> Within the letters page, rival storylines clashed, were juxtaposed, and held in contrast with one another. For many readers, this was the only forum in which their opinions and assessments of the

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<sup>78</sup> Perrin and Vaisey, "Parallel Public Spheres: Distance and Discourse in Letters to the Editor," 785.

<sup>79</sup> Amy Whipple, "Revisiting the 'Rivers of Blood' Controversy: Letters to Enoch Powell," *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 3 (2009): 719.

situation were publicly measured and interpreted against the views of strangers who did not share their perspective. It seems clear, given the number of letters from multiple signatories or particular workplaces, that people were discussing these issues with their colleagues and friends. The opportunity to debate with people not in their circle of opinion was vital to creating a culture of discussion, always mediated by the editorial team, which for many would likely have been their only access to alternative perspectives from equally informed locals.

The curation of letters by the editorial team indicated to readers what issues were pertinent and legitimate for discussion. By offering locals the chance to have an opinion on the dispute, a small amount of power was available to those who wrote and read the column. It is this dialogue that stands out most clearly from the letters. As a result of editorial choices, writers' views and readers' interpretations, a conversation emerged within the letters page that constructed symbolic boundaries and signalled what was acceptable to think and say in public.<sup>80</sup> As arguments were constructed and bolstered through the process of writing and reading these letters, one thing consistently reinforced throughout the dispute was the right of Wulfrunians to have an opinion on the matter.<sup>81</sup> From the very start of the conflict, when the *Express and Star* published the straw poll of local passengers, to the end when they were probed for their views on the Sikh victory, the newspaper reinforced the notion that, at least on this subject, local opinion mattered. At a time when locals were feeling powerless and unconsulted on the subject of immigration, the newspaper's insistence that their thoughts on the dispute mattered had an important effect – it was one of the few areas in which their right to have a say was granted.

The particular narratives that came to dominate the dispute attest to this. As the turban came to symbolise the level of change locals were willing to accept, people staked out their positions through stories that became entrenched. The narrative that the rules were sacred and applicable to all underlined a principle of integration that laid boundaries of the acceptable difference of immigrants and the extent to which the town was willing to recognise it. This abstract liberal framing of the dispute then led to claims that Sikhs were demanding a larger share of recognition than they should be allowed, which bolstered the argument that immigrants did not want to integrate in to the life and values of the town.<sup>82</sup> Even those who supported the Sikhs employed narratives that objectified them and testimonies that attested to their goodness.<sup>83</sup> Claims that Sikhs were 'better' than other immigrants may have provided some comfort in a swell of negativity for those fighting the turban campaign, but fundamentally they were about the right of locals to decide the level of recognition they were willing to

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<sup>80</sup> Kitty van Vuuren *et al* have noted that it is problematic to consider LTEs as representative of public opinion, but they can help to delineate a community's dominant voice and values. Vuuren *et al.*, "Clean Energy Futures and Place-Based Responses: A Comparison of Letters-to-the-Editor in Two Australian Regions," 31.

<sup>81</sup> As Bill Schwarz has noted, letters to the press at this point in history performed an almost redemptive function for those engaging, giving people a small but profoundly experienced amount of power to express themselves in a public outlet. Schwarz, *The White Man's World*, 37.

<sup>82</sup> Fomina has argued that this was based on the understanding that immigrants had equal status under the law. Claims for recognition thus not only were perceived as demanding special treatment and extra privileges, but also prompted native populations to ask 'who are we?' Joanna Fomina, "Immigration Policy Debates and Their Significance for Multiculturalism in Britain," *Polish Sociological Review* 1, no. 169 (2010): 66.

<sup>83</sup> For example: "I have lived in India many years. My chief production engineer, production manager, personnel manager and legal advisor are all Sikhs. To us Europeans living in India the beard and the turban are, generally speaking, a sign of 'that little bit better' than the others." Roland C. Heath, "Letter to the Editor," *Express and Star*, December 19, 1967. Several personal testimonies of this sort emerged in the letters page, which set Sikhs apart from other immigrants settling in Wolverhampton by commenting positively on their character.

offer. Sweeping generalisations about the good character of Sikhs were used to demonstrate that they were better, more hardworking, cleaner and more 'like us' than other immigrants.<sup>84</sup>

As McLaren and Johnson have noted, people use established identities to provide a clear sense of self, and they tend to have their basis in perceptions of difference, particularly lifestyle and value differences.<sup>86</sup> The deepest form of threat to these identities may be not economic but symbolic, stemming from concerns about loss of values and ways of life. The anchor that the abstract liberal framing of the dispute as a question of the rules provided in the face of deep changes to the town's established way of life should not be overlooked. The dichotomy created between the Sikh claims and the rules constructed the latter as typical of the English way of life, any step away from their enforcement became synonymous with its defeat. Hence the deep anxiety suffered by locals when the dispute came to an end and the hyperbolic claims that Sikh victory represented the degrading of civilisation.

But perhaps what emerges from the discourse most clearly is the correspondent's developing understanding of their own whiteness and corresponding white victimhood. Entangled with narratives which claimed that the working classes had been dumped with the problem of immigration, the push for recognition by Sikhs brought in to sharp focus for correspondents their own ethnic identities and led to a narrative which claimed that white identity, opinion and dignity was being undermined in the clamour to respect the identity of immigrant groups. The highly visible presence of immigrants forced Wolverhamptonians to conceptualise their own ethnic identities. In this sense, Wolverhampton's turban dispute was for locals what Gayer refers to as the globalization of identity politics: 'the process through which groups modify their sense of belonging under the influence of transnational relations, ideas or events, the reshaping of their ethnicity affecting in turn world politics, at the national, international and supranational level.'<sup>87</sup> Through immigrants' calls for recognition of cultural symbols, the white majority of the town was called on to imagine itself as a racialised whole and the letters provided the means of doing this, organising a community that could be imagined as embattled and victimised.

The letters demonstrate that narratives put in place at the start of the conflict remained resilient throughout. Despite the high profile intervention of Powell and the cascade of letters that followed his Birmingham speech, he did not introduce any new storylines or tropes to the conflict. Rather, his views gave locals the confidence to voice their opinions more forcefully and with greater conviction. Although Powell may have increased the willingness of local MPs to get involved in the dispute and therefore increased pressure on the committee, it was the actions of Sohan Singh Jolly that eventually forced the Transport Committee's hand in the matter. The narratives had been too well established to allow room for manoeuvre for the leaders of the turban campaign and, unable to make headway within the strict terms of the discourse on the dispute, movement forward had to be made by stepping outside of the discourse and increasing the stakes.

The 1967-9 Wolverhampton turban dispute has been understood as a footnote in the history of race relations in the UK. This article has demonstrated its importance, not only as one of the first successful

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<sup>84</sup> Ghassan Hage has argued along these lines that racist discourse is a fundamentally nationalist practice, based on racialised understandings of who has a right to decide the racial make-up of the nation. Ghassan Hage, *White Nation: Fantasies of White Supremacy in a Multicultural Society* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>86</sup> Lauren McLaren and Mark Johnson, "Resources, Group Conflict and Symbols: Explaining Anti-Immigration Hostility in Britain," *Political Studies* 55, no. 4 (2007): 715.

<sup>87</sup> Laurent Gayer, "The Globalization of Identity Politics: The Sikh Experience," *International Journal of Punjab Studies* 7, no. 2 (2002): 4.

ethnic mobilisations for cultural recognition, but also as a symbolic battle that constructed new identities for those involved. Wolverhampton was the first local authority to experience and articulate this as a struggle that brought into focus the very way of life of the town and the nation. White Wulfrunians experienced no shift in material conditions when the turban was allowed, but the pain of those who had invested emotional energy in upholding the way of life that the regulations had come to represent was real. The narratives developed by local people to explain and defend their position offer a valuable insight into the ways such conflicts come to have deep emotional resonance, even when what is at stake appears to be very little.

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