



**HAL**  
open science

## Stigmatising the BBC in letters of support to Enoch Powell (1968)

Olivier Esteves

► **To cite this version:**

Olivier Esteves. Stigmatising the BBC in letters of support to Enoch Powell (1968). Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain. Cahiers du MIMMOC, 2022, Censorship and blind spots: the BBC's silences, 27, 10.4000/mimmoc.10150 . hal-04015850

**HAL Id: hal-04015850**

**<https://hal.science/hal-04015850>**

Submitted on 5 Jun 2023

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

---

## Stigmatising the BBC in letters of support to Enoch Powell (1968)

Olivier Esteves

---



### Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/mimmoc/10150>

DOI: 10.4000/mimmoc.10150

ISSN: 1951-6789

### Publisher

Université de Poitiers

Brought to you by Université de Poitiers



### Electronic reference

Olivier Esteves, "Stigmatising the BBC in letters of support to Enoch Powell (1968)", *Mémoire(s), identité(s), marginalité(s) dans le monde occidental contemporain* [Online], 27 | 2022, Online since 24 January 2022, connection on 05 June 2023. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/mimmoc/10150> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/mimmoc.10150>

---

This text was automatically generated on 16 February 2023.



Creative Commons - Attribution 4.0 International - CC BY 4.0  
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

---

# Stigmatising the BBC in letters of support to Enoch Powell (1968)

Olivier Esteves

---

## Introduction

- 1 On 20 April 1968, a laissez-faire, nativist Conservative, Enoch Powell, delivered an anti-immigration speech that changed radically and durably how so-called “race relations” are debated in the country. Indeed, one political truism of these post-Brexit times is to argue, with John Solomos, that “we are still living through the consequences of what Powell said at the Midland Hotel in 1968”,<sup>1</sup> the place where the Wolverhampton Member of Parliament uttered words meticulously crafted to spark a national controversy and, in the process, elbow his way onto political centre stage as well as, as it turned out, make him a political martyr at the hands of ‘the do-gooders’ within the Conservative party.
- 2 What is less well-known even in England is that in the fortnight that followed his inflammatory speech of 20 April 1968, remembered as “Rivers of Blood speech”,<sup>2</sup> Enoch Powell received some 100,000 letters, overwhelmingly in support of his campaign against coloured immigration into Britain. Not only never before in British history, but also never in the history of a Western democracy, did a locally elected representative, one-time Minister of Health (1960-63), receive so much written support in so short a period of time. This had never happened before 1968, and has never happened since. More than fifty years later, dozens upon dozens of motley bundles contain these documents, and have remained barely excavated.
- 3 In this contribution, which is partly inspired by a larger monograph project, I wish to unpack, from a 10,000 letter sample, those references to the BBC that may be apprehended as illustrations of the reactionary response to what was known in the 1960s as ‘permissive society’. Whilst these references are themselves clearly residual within the very large sample, they nonetheless shed interesting light on the interconnectedness between two types of discourses: first, the anti-elite backlash that

vilifies the BBC as a multiracial bureaucracy of liberal ‘do-gooders’, second, a moral aversion against certain perceived ills of the 1960s, that the BBC was seen as assiduously propagating in its programming. In this respect the second type of discourse is of course evocative of Mary Whitehouse’s moral crusade,<sup>3</sup> whose racial and ethnic lineaments have received but scant attention by scholars. At the end of this contribution, some reflections are ventured about some of the more recent afterlives of Enoch Powell’s speech and the BBC, through both the 2008 ‘White Season’ (BBC1) as well as through the BBC4 reading of Powell’s speech in 2018, which came under fire from the anti-racist and beyond.<sup>4</sup>

## The context

- 4 Now, what was it that made so many Britons express their support of Enoch Powell spontaneously in epistolary form? In his Birmingham speech, the Conservative M.P. from Wolverhampton stigmatised what he saw as the suicidal passivity of the British political elites faced with the influx of a very large number of immigrants from the New Commonwealth (the Indian subcontinent, the West Indies). These, according to Powell, were not only too many, they were also too different and too concentrated within a few industrial sites of ethnic clustering labelled as “ghettoes”, of which the midland town of Wolverhampton had a few.
- 5 The immediate spark to what Simon Heffer, Powell’s authorized biographer, called his “detonation”<sup>5</sup> was the parliamentary debate on the 1968 Race Relations Act. Although this appears with hindsight as a somewhat timid attempt at addressing racial discrimination, across a section of the British public it was construed as nothing short of reverse discrimination. For some, the recent U.S. riots following the assassination of Martin Luther King in Memphis (04. 04. 1968) were evidence aplenty that distinct races simply cannot live together. All of this proved an opportune timing for what history has remembered as the ultimate rhetorical masterpiece in inter-racial doom-saying. For the Birmingham speech caused an instant tsunami of the highest political magnitude. This, no doubt, conferred a new status upon its author. Having violently breached the cautious bipartisan consensus that had prevailed until then on questions of immigration,<sup>6</sup> Powell was promptly sacked from the Shadow Cabinet by Edward Heath. And overnight the man was turned into a political martyr.

## Silenced majority and perceived censorship

- 6 Some epistolary supporters to Enoch Powell used “silent majority”, which itself predated the Richard Nixon speech that was to make it a household phrase, in a 3 November 1969 speech dealing with the Vietnam War (“Great Silent Majority speech”). One man from Waltham Cross (Hertfordshire), and this is only one example, wrote in a letter dated 21 April 1968 : “The thanks of the silent majority are due to you for your courageous speech of Saturday”.<sup>7</sup> If anything, this confirms that populist leaders (Powell, Nixon) often directly echo feelings but also specific ways of expressing these feelings in order to give them national, indeed international here, resonance. The impression of being silenced on immigration questions was crystallized by the media coverage of impassioned demands made by other categories —such as students—, whose vociferousness was given much air-time, on issues generally unconnected with

race relations. The silent majority was silenced precisely because it was respectable, law-abiding and ordinary, which did not seem to catch the headlines in their views. A Dagenham constituent deplored: “What do the British people have to do to make their voices heard? Grow our hair down our backs, take dope, look as if you have not had a bath for six months?”<sup>8</sup> Across the Atlantic at exactly the same time, governor George Wallace of Alabama claimed the two four-letter words hippies did not know were “w-o-r-k” and “s-o-a-p”.<sup>9</sup>

- 7 More specific strategies of silencing were also exposed. Some Powellites were very bitter that their letter to the editor of the local press remained unpublished. These individuals were, literally, considering themselves as a silenced majority. One man from West Yorkshire confided: “I wrote a letter to the *Halifax Courier* last week on the Race Relations Act as strong as yours and the editor refused to publish it”,<sup>10</sup> which led this constituent from Devon to conclude: “Writing to the press is a waste of time”.<sup>11</sup> A former teacher in Oxford said she was censored when the *Birmingham Post* refused to publish her mail, a factory worker from Blackburn shared the same experience with *The Sunday Express*, and a Dudley man was rebuked by the *Daily Mirror*’s ‘voice of protest’ column.<sup>12</sup> Whatever the political leanings of the local press and their approach to immigration questions (the difference, for instance, was huge between, say, *The Telegraph and Argus* and *The Smethwick Telephone and Warley Courier*<sup>13</sup>), not having one’s letter published must have exacerbated the feeling of being silenced by elites, however local in nature they might be here. In the 1960s, 90% of Bradford households read *The Telegraph and Argus*, and yet the paper balked at giving some columns to anti-immigration views. It also printed an Urdu-language section for Pakistani immigrants.<sup>14</sup> It is unsurprising then that Powell’s postbag also included backlash against this specific newspaper.<sup>15</sup>
- 8 The Bradford paper only replicated larger, national initiatives towards immigrants, particularly within the BBC. In May 1965, Hugh Greene, who acted as its director general from 1960 to 1969, met with Maurice Foley, Under-Secretary of State in the Department of Economic Affairs. As such, Foley’s job was to smooth the integration of New Commonwealth immigrants, among other things. Foley emphasized to Greene the urgent need for language teaching among Indians and Pakistanis, as well as general advice about life in Britain for immigrants.<sup>16</sup> Greene met with Jim Rose (director of the Survey of Race Relations), Mark Bonham Carter (Race Relations Board) and Philip Mason (director of the IRR) a few times a year to hold debates on the race-relations improvements that the BBC could bring about thanks to its reporting.<sup>17</sup> Despite these official concerns the BBC still had to cater to the majority public and to majority tastes, particularly at a time of growing competition coming from the private sector (ITV).<sup>18</sup> The broadcaster’s interest in fostering better race relations and their broadly liberal coverage of events stoked the ire of some Powellites, whose feelings were exacerbated by a few P. R. coups when the BBC seemed to have allied itself with foreign figures seen as white baiters. Among these were Malcolm X (who travelled to Smethwick with the BBC)<sup>19</sup> or, less than a year before Powell’s speech, Black Power figure Stokeley Carmichael. The BBC was a recurrent object of naming and shaming in the letters, as much as the Archbishop of Canterbury. Below are some emblematic examples:
- “Why is BBC [sic] allowed to get away with being so biased? It is said to be riddled with communists.” (woman from Ascot, Berkshire)
- “The immense propaganda machine of the B.B.C and the press are against the people”. (unidentified constituent).

“I now find the B.B.C is a platform for every self-acknowledged enemy of Britain”  
(woman from Bath).

“The BBC give us large helpings of Vietnam to obscure the misdoings on the home front” (man, Brixham (Devon))<sup>20</sup>.

- 9 Decades before there was any talk of “fake news” the BBC was exposed as a manufacture of “lies”, a well-oiled bureaucracy led by leftists with an agenda that was hostile to the British people racially defined. Some of these responses were anti-communist knee-jerk reactions typical of cold war times, others underlined the prioritization of home news rather than international news (here Vietnam, elsewhere news about Greece), which they generally associated with political demonstrations by activist youths. At other times too, Powellites were scathing with the BBC but they put it on a par with ITV, just like others tarred *The Guardian*, *The Times* and their local papers with the same multiracial brush. One woman from High Wycombe was bitter against ITV, because, during a televised debate, “three coloured speakers were given a ‘platform’ to air their vociferous views and one white man. No spokesman had been invited to represent the indigenous population of this sorely-trying island”.<sup>21</sup> A man from Rutland more simply noted : “we are all fed up with listening and looking at black people on television and in the newspapers”.<sup>22</sup> Numerological racism, or the feeling that “immigrants” were “space-invaders”, was also lived as an intrusion into the home, when watching the screens of hard-earned TV sets. For some, the mere presence of non-whites on the television was a form of political promotion, even if news were factually reported (such as Malcolm X’s 1965 visit, which made many headlines),<sup>23</sup> or even when *negative* comments were made about them. This was white privilege as applied to news reporting: if being white was the unwritten norm, to have non-whites appear on the telly could only be an unacceptable encroachment.

## The BBC’s arrogant elitism and the mocked majority

- 10 A few Powellites from the educated, upper-middle classes were critical of the way the BBC gave in to facile ridiculing of “racist roughs”, unable to mobilise the cultural capital of media elites to air their views. In a very long, detailed letter to Powell which was copied to Cliff Michelmore, a well-known BBC presenter (*Newsnight*) and producer, one man ruefully noted that “it is very easy to make fools of the inarticulate and to discredit their feelings, and the Twenty Four Hours team is quick to take advantage of the common man not skilled in formulating his ideas and giving them coherent expression”.<sup>24</sup> Others broadened this critique to other news media. One Herne Hill woman chided the newspapers in general for sneering at the inarticulate dockers, who were traditionally Labour but in this case were hoodwinked into supporting a Tory. According to her, “anyone of average intelligence must be aware that this merely demonstrates the strength of their feelings on this issue”.<sup>25</sup>
- 11 The debate here ran parallel to the broadcasting of a hugely popular series in those years, *Till Death Us Do Part*, which was broadcast from 1965 to 1968, before being reprogrammed from 1972 to 1975. Alf Garnett was its central character, a “Cockney bigot”<sup>26</sup> who was laughably prejudiced, but who was quickly raised into a household name whose blatant racism was revered by many. The name itself wound its way into Powellite support.<sup>27</sup> With that character, created by socialist author Johnny Speight who had a working-class background,<sup>28</sup> the BBC had spawned a sort of ethnocentric Frankenstein which, they were concerned, might do more damage than good by

legitimizing racist hostility (through giving it air-time) rather than exposing racist fallacies, although this had been their pedagogic, racial harmony-fostering objective originally. Darrell Newton refers to Alf Garnett as “a double-edged sword within contemporary popular culture”.<sup>29</sup> In parallel fashion, it may be argued that giving air-time to demonstrating dockers inevitably gave way to critiques of elitist arrogance towards the uncouth roughs and their false consciousness as well as providing them with a national stump to freely air their backlash discourses.

## Beyond race: ‘The Thing’ and permissive society

- 12 Bill Schwarz recounts having interviewed Enoch Powell in 1988.<sup>30</sup> In this, the populist leader reminisced that twenty years before, his interest in student unrest and the upheavals of the late 1960s led him to collect a file of material which was, as such, unrelated to immigration. Unable to give a name to this collection of articles, he wrote a cryptic “The Thing” upon the folder.
- 13 As has been amply demonstrated already, the letters include numerous inarticulate and angry references to “The Thing”.<sup>31</sup> These personal confessions intimate the extent to which immigration is a central, but certainly not the only, issue arousing the anger of Powellites. They also confirm the political intimacy in the correspondence between Powell and his supporters, where putting pen to paper is a cathartic outlet that does not have a specific goal apart from that of “feeling good” as it is being written. A lot of the contents analysed here foreshadow some of the culture wars that were to be waged a few decades later, as much as they are fully in tune with the backlash against “permissive society” in the 1960s.
- 14 A panoply of legislations liberalizing British society were introduced in the years 1965-1967 in particular, during Jenkins’s liberal hour. Among the best-known are the abolition of the death penalty in 1965, the Abortion Act of 1967, the Sexual Offences Act of 1967 which decriminalised homosexuality, not to mention the laws relaxing theatre censorship and divorce.<sup>32</sup> In fact, and despite the impressive breadth of such reforms, these were no official endorsement of hedonism, and some Labour leaders (Wilson, Gaitskell) were keenly aware that legislation on homosexuality, for instance, would make their party lose millions of votes.<sup>33</sup> Home Secretary James Callaghan was adamant there should be a “halt in the alarming tide of so called permissiveness” after recommendations had been made to relax laws on drug-taking by the Wootton Report of 1968.<sup>34</sup> One year before, Mick Jagger had been on trial for drug-possession.
- 15 Powellites who inveighed against permissive society almost always singled out Labour for blame. Or their fancied allies, such as students.<sup>35</sup> This they did by enumerating often unrelated issues on which they took a clear, moral stand and often seethed against the democratic deficit around such decisions. As for debates on immigration and repatriation the issues mobilized here lent themselves conveniently to either “for” or “against” responses, and on every societal question debated Powellites were incensed they were every time on the losing side of the battle. One man from Linlithgow (West Lothian, Scotland) whose P.S. read “Please excuse writing and phrasing, I’m not educated much at all” blurted out: “Immigrants out, capital punishment and corporal punishment *in*, on these two matters alone a government could be voted in”.<sup>36</sup> The following quotes expressed similar sentiments on the same questions:



“We do not want to go into the Common Market, we admire Ian Smith’s ability, we abhor the new abortion law, we did not want the abolition of Capital punishment” (constituent from Newton Abbot (Devon)).

“Several bills have now gone through – no hanging, homosexuality being two – which I would say were completely contrary to the wishes of the majority of people, so that we are sending members to parliament who are not really representing us” (constituent from Glasgow).

“I would demand a referendum on: 1/ the racial problem, immigration; 2/ the entry of Britain into the Common Market; 3/ Restoration of the Death Penalty and of corporal punishment” (constituent from Croydon).<sup>37</sup>

- 16 The use of “abhor” by the Devon constituent, combined with this uneducated man from West Lothian, illuminate the cross-class nature of this backlash against permissiveness, whose undemocratic imposition was associated with the Race Relations Bill and the very fact of non-white immigration. In fact, the point was hammered by a Halifax man, who called himself “very devout”, and said he had “come across a large cross section of our West Riding workers who vote socialist like sheep! Yet I have met *none* who agreed with *not* hanging murderers, *not* birching sex and other hooligans or with allowing this senseless influx of coloured people”.<sup>38</sup> Despite the occasional “I do not know your views on this”, it is noteworthy that for most, anyone so adamantly against the immigrant influx had to be opposed to the panoply of Labour-introduced reforms too. But, in fact, on this Powell proved a more ambiguous figure: he had voted to decriminalise homosexuality and was opposed to the death penalty, two facts that are never mentioned in the letters, either because it was not known, or because his stance on immigration really eclipsed all the rest. These discrepancies revealed the Manichean following of Powell, and the way his postbag acted as a political receptacle able to ingest variegated grievances.
- 17 Admittedly, in many of these reactionary iterations fraught with a sense of nostalgia, the BBC itself is rarely invoked. But it is key to keep in mind that critiques of the BBC are in themselves part of a much more general discourse, hinging on “the Thing”. One illustration of this may suffice. A woman –the gendered dimension to this moral crusade may be stressed, as is shown through the high-profile figure of Mary Whitehouse –<sup>39</sup> from Nottingham congratulated Powell for speaking truth to power, before lamenting that “England as I and many of my countrymen see it, is finished. Like the Roman Empire she is passing away. Is there anything in England today worth going to the end of the road to shout about ?”<sup>40</sup> She then went on to produce a 20-point charter, called “A charter to halt the decline of England but not a guarantee to prevent it ...Absolutely.” In this she demanded the abolition of trade-unions, of blood sports, that Sunday become again a day of rest, and fittingly her point 15 was about the BBC:
- To stop the BBC from putting on plays which worry one because one can see no rhyme or reason in them. To stop the BBC from putting on any sort of filth. To stop the use of swearing and any sort of violence being brought into the home whatsoever. This is a prime source of our decadence I feel.
- 18 The last word must be taken very seriously: these epistolary Powellites demanded that their feelings be taken into consideration. Much like the Nixon – and Wallace –instilled white middle-class rage across the Atlantic, these self-styled deserving taxpayers adumbrate the emotional voters who were to triumph with Brexit and Trump’s election decades later. Their written testimonies, expressed in private to a figure who wanted to occupy the centre of public space, also foreshadow the ‘emotional turn’ in the social sciences. In this respect, the BBC is placed at a kind of cognitive, emotional crossroads



for those disgruntled Britons : as an object of hate, the national institution also elicits feelings of shame (“what the country has become”), nostalgia (“our parents used to be proud of the BBC”), injustice (“our taxes are used to finance such filth, such calls for multiracial Britain”) and fear (“Black Power will come to Britain”).

## Conclusion: the afterlives of Powell and the BBC

- 19 In March 2008, BBC2 aired a series of documentaries called *White Season*, with the following episodes : “Last Orders”, about a Bradford working men’s club that feels imperilled by Asian encroachment, “Rivers of Blood”, about the impact of Powell’s speech in the long term, “White Girl”, about a girl becoming interested in Islam, “The Poles are coming!”, “The Primary”, about multi-ethnic schooling in Birmingham, and lastly “All White in Barking”, about the dynamics of housing policies and the White Backlash in Barking and Dagenham.<sup>41</sup>
- 20 The series came under fire from many scholars and from the anti-racist left because it tended to performatively confirm the populist stance that “whites”, especially “the white working-class” is becoming invisible in Britain. Such views tended to exacerbate the sense that immigrants and ethnic minorities are themselves outside the working-class, since this is construed as “white”. The BBC in airing “White Season” was heedless to the fact that the shifting signifier<sup>42</sup> “white working-class” must be handled with caution. The English white working-class may be dismissed as artificially manufactured by the media and politicians, particularly Enoch Powell. This phrase itself, as Jon Lawrence pithily states, not only deflects attention from the virulent racism in other parts of English society, but it reinforces the idea of working-class people as “unchanging, anachronistic, and ‘left-behind’”.<sup>43</sup>
- 21 More worryingly, the much-publicized advert to episode 2 on the so-called ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech showed images of the terrorist attacks of 7/7, that caused the death of 56 people in London, just after Powell’s prophetic voice of doom from 1968 is heard.<sup>44</sup> Very problematically, in doing so, the BBC tapped into simplistic views of pathological Muslim self-ghettoising as a driver of violent extremism, removing crucial foreign policy issues (the disastrous war in Iraq) from the debate.<sup>45</sup>
- 22 Ten years later, in 2018, BBC4 was criticized for broadcasting the full version of Powell’s speech, read by actor Ian McDiarmid.<sup>46</sup> In the wake of the populist upsurge coinciding with the Brexit vote, it was probably inevitable that such a reading would be far from consensual. But beyond the immediate backcloth to the broadcast I want to look into some memorial elements that did crystallize resentment against the reading of the speech.
- 23 Paul Boateng was born in Hackney in 1951, of Ghanaian and Scottish heritage. As a teenager at the time of Powell’s speech, Boateng reminisces: “I was one of the ‘wide-eyed, grinning piccaninnies’ that [Powell] saw fit to quote in a letter... For the first time in the country of my birth, on the day following the speech I was shouted at and spat at and abused in the street”.<sup>47</sup> It is quite fitting that other future ethnic minority figures share analogous memories, such as Hanif Kureishi, a mixed-race teenager in 1968 growing up in Kent,<sup>48</sup> or Stuart Hall, who had recently moved to Birmingham at the time of Powell’s speech.<sup>49</sup>

- 24 For a dozen Boatengs, Kureishis or Halls, how many experiences of harassment, verbal and physical violence suffered by anonymous non-white immigrants,<sup>50</sup> whose lived experience in the streets of London, Bristol, Birmingham was altered overnight by the toxic effect of Powell's speech? In her book on Powell's embeddedness in Wolverhampton, Shirin Hirsch quotes one Vanessa Kirkpatrick, a West-Indian from North-East Wolverhampton:

I can still remember vividly the fear I felt as a young black girl [...] I recall being unable to sleep the night that Powell expressed his inflammatory views... I feared going to school the next day – where I was just one of around half a dozen black pupils. Maybe it was the overactive imagination of a young child, but I actually thought I might be lynched.<sup>51</sup>

- 25 Unquestionably, Powell proved a masterful uninhibitor of racial violence, whether verbal, physical, symbolic, in the short and longer terms. On the latter dimension, Granada-born education activist Bernard Coard pointed out, in *How the West-Indian Child is Made Educationally Subnormal in the British Education System*, “The black child in Britain, facing a white examiner, remembers the white landlord who has pushed Mum and Dad around; he remembers the face of Powell on the television screen, demanding the expatriation of Black people and their ‘picaninny’ children”.<sup>52</sup> As Gordon Allport had underlined, “from the point of view of social consequences much ‘polite prejudice’ is harmless enough –being confined to idle chatter”.<sup>53</sup> What Powell did was to transform these hushed, personal, harmless feelings into collective, harmful, more socially accepted ones, leading to racist and nationalist violence in the worst cases, exacerbating real or imagined demarcation lines between whites and non-whites in many cases.
- 26 To sum up then, among those who mobilised against the 2018 BBC4 broadcast were many of the children and grandchildren of immigrants whose lived experiences in Britain –and particularly in England – were altered overnight by Powell's speech. Without arguing that the BBC ought not to have aired the speech, it does seem that ethnic-minority memories of Powell have but little been taken into consideration. With hindsight, and if one compares the reactionary backlash against the BBC in 1968 and the anti-racist, left-leaning backlash against the BBC's pandering to populist sentiments in both 2008 and 2018, it almost feels like the British institution, after years when it was exposed as infiltrated by ‘lefties’ and ‘multiracial do-gooders’ by the right, has more recently chosen to project an image of greater proximity to the public at large, thus lending itself to criticism of its populism.

---

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### Primary sources:

Staffordshire Record Office, Powell Papers, D3123/11; D3123/12; D3123/13; D3123/14; D3123/16; D3123/47; D3123/53; D3123/63; D3123/77; D3123/80; D3123/90; D3123/95; D3123/167; D3123/333; D3123/336.

**Secondary sources:**

- Carter, Dan. *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics*. New York, Simon & Schuster, 1995, 572 p.
- Corthorn, Paul. *Enoch Powell: Politics and Ideas in Modern Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 233 p.
- Esteves, Olivier. *The 'Desegregation' of English Schools: Bussing, Race and Urban Space (1960s-1980s)*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2018, 224 p.
- Esteves, Olivier. Porion, Stéphane (eds). *The Lives and Afterlives of Enoch Powell: The Undying Political Animal*. Abingdon, Routledge, 2019, 191 p.
- Gilborn, David. "The White working-class, racism and respectability: victims, degenerates and interest-convergence", *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 58 (1), 2010, p. 3-25.
- Lawrence, Jon. *Me, Me, Me: The Search for Community in Post-War England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 352 p.
- Newton, Darrell, *Paving the Empire Road, BBC Television and Black Britons*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2011, 288 p.
- Schaffer, Gavin. "'Till Death Us Do Part' and the BBC: Racial Politics and the British Working Classes 1965-75", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 45 (2), 2010, p. 454-477.
- Schofield, Camilla. *Enoch Powell and the Making of Post-colonial Britain*, Cambridge & New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013, 381 p.
- Schwarz, Bill. *Memories of Empire: The White Man's World, Vol.1*. London & New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, 600 p.
- Thompson, Ben. *Ban This Filth! Letters from the Mary Whitehouse Archive*, London, Faber, 2012, 418 p.
- Vinen, Richard. *The Long '68: Radical Protest and its Enemies*. London, Penguin Books, 2018, 446 p.

## NOTES

1. Quoted in J. Solomos, "'Strangers in their own land': Powellism's policy Impact", *Patterns of Prejudice*, Vol. 53 (2), 2019, 10. See also P. Corthorn, *Enoch Powell: Politics and Ideas in Modern Britain*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, p. 159-161.
2. I have decided against using the phrase, preferring to refer to his 'Birmingham speech', like Randall Hansen or Peter Brooke. See Hansen, 182; Peter Brooke, "India, Post-Imperialism and the Origins of Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' Speech", *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 50 (3), 2007, 669-687. Interestingly, Brooke uses "rivers of blood" in his title but not within his article, where there is talk of his "Birmingham speech". On the choice itself, see O. Esteves & S. Porion (eds), *The Lives and Afterlives of Enoch Powell: The Undying Political Animal*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2019, p. 2.
3. Thompson, Ben. *Ban This Filth! Letters from the Mary Whitehouse Archive*, London, Faber, 2012.
4. See for instance *Archive on 4*, "50 Years on: 'Rivers of Blood'", <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09z08w3>
5. See *Like the Roman: The Life of Enoch Powell*, London, Faber & Faber, 2008 [1988], p. 449; Powell delighted in using this rocket metaphor. It is well-known he confided in his then journalist friend Clement Jones, just before the speech: "I'm not telling you what

is in my next speech. You'll get an advance copy in the fullness of time. But you know how a rocket goes up into the air, breaks up and explodes into lots of stars and then falls down to the ground. Well, this speech is going to go up like a rocket, and when it gets to the top, the stars are going to stay up" (Nick Jones, Clement Jones's son in Esteves & Porion (*eds*)), p. 53.

6. Camilla Schofield also insists on the fact that Powell kept his speech a secret from his party before delivering it, which is a breach of protocol for any member of a Shadow Cabinet. See her *Enoch Powell and the Making of Post-colonial Britain*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013, p. 209.

7. Staffordshire Record Office (hereafter SRO), Powell Papers [hereafter PP], D3123/13.

8. SRO, PP, D3123/333.

9. Carter, Dann. *Politics of Rage, George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics*, New York, Simon & Schuster, 1995, p. 250.

10. SRO, PP, D3123/16.

11. SRO, PP, D3123/14.

12. Respectively SRO, PP, D3123/13; D3123/12; D3123/336.

13. The former was very reluctant to publish anti-immigration views, the latter was not at all. On *The Telegraph & Argus* for instance, see O. Esteves, *The Desegregation of English Schools: Bussing, Race and Urban Space*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2018, 72-3.

14. On the way newspaper editors may act as gatekeepers in giving access to the "Letters to the editor" columns, see J. E. Richardson, B. Franklin. "Dear Editor, race, readers' letters and the local press," *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 74 (2), 2003, p. 92.

15. For instance in SRO, PP, D3123/336.

16. See D. Newton, *Paving the Empire Road: BBC Television and Black Britons*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011, p. 209-210.

17. *Ibid.*, 204-5.

18. *Ibid.*, 197-8.

19. J. Street, "Malcolm X, Smethwick, and the Influence of the African American Freedom Struggle on British Race Relations in the 1960s", *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 38 (6), 2008, p. 942.

20. Respectively SRO, PP, D3123/13; D3123/50; D3123/167; D3123/336.

21. SRO, PP, D3123/11.

22. SRO, PP, D3123/11.

23. J. Street, p. 943.

24. SRO, PP, D3123/53.

25. SRO, PP, D3123/77.

26. Quoted in D. Newton, p. 201.

27. See man from Southampton, SRO, PP, D3123/333.

28. See G. Schaffer, "'Till Death Us Do Part' and the BBC: Racial Politics and the British Working Classes 1965-75", *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 45 (2), 2010, p. 454-477.

29. Newton, Darell. p. 201.

30. Schwarz, Bill. *Memories of Empire: The White Man's World, Vol.1*. London & New York, Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 4-9.

31. Also see A. Whipple, "Revisiting the 'Rivers of Blood' Controversy: Letters to Enoch Powell", *Journal of British Studies*, no. 48 (July 2009), p. 729-730 for similar epistolary backlash.

32. For details, see P. Thompson, “Labour’s ‘Gannex conscience’? Politics and popular attitudes in the ‘permissive society’” in R. Coopey, S. Fielding, N. Tiratsoo (eds.), *The Wilson Governments 1964-1970*, London, Pinter, 1993, p. 137-8.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 139.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 141. On theatre censorship more specifically, see R. Vinen, *The Long '68: Radical Protest and its Enemies*, London, Penguin Books, 2018, p. 203.
35. In October 1968, *The People* published an article entitled “If the word ‘student’ makes you sick”, see R. Vinen, p. 216.
36. SRO, PP, D3123/63.
37. Respectively SRO, PP, D3123/16; D3123/80; D3123/90; D3123/95.
38. SRO, PP, D3123/47.
39. A parallel may be ventured with the U.S., see Michelle M. Nickerson, *Mothers of Conservatism: Women and the Postwar Right*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014.
40. SRO, PP, D3123/20.
41. On this question, see Justin Gest, *The New Minority: White Working-Class Politics in an Age of Immigration and Inequality*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2016, which is a comparative ethnographic fieldwork in Youngstown (Ohio) and in Barking / Dagenham (East London).
42. Gilborn, David. “The White working-class, racism and respectability: victims, degenerates and interest-convergence”, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, Vol. 58 (1), 2010, p. 3-4
43. Quoted in *Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-War England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), p. 155. Also Kjartan Páll Sveinsson (ed.), *Who Cares About the White Working-Class?* (London: Runnymede Trust, 2009) : <https://www.runnymedetrust.org/uploads/publications/pdfs/WhoCaresAboutTheWhiteWorkingClass-2009.pdf> (accessed 20. 02. 2020).
44. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vFo1xOSlggg> (at 2.15)
45. On this question, see L. Simpson, N. Finney, *Sleepwalking to Segregation? Challenging Myths about Race and Migration*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2009.
46. See *Archive on 4*, “50 Years on: ‘Rivers of Blood’”, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b09z08w3>.
47. Quoted in C. Schofield, p. 248.
48. *The Guardian*, “Knock, Knock, it’s Enoch...”, 12. 12. 2014.
49. Quoted in S. Hirsch, *In the Shadow of Enoch Powell: Race, Locality and Resistance*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2018, p. 11.
50. For other anecdotal evidence, see C. Schofield, p. 247.
51. Quoted in Hirsch, p. 12.
52. Quoted in B. Richardson (ed.), *Tell It Like It Is: How Our Schools Fail Black Children*, London, Bookmarks, 2007, p. 127.
53. Quoted in G. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, Cambridge (Mass.), Perseus Group, 1979 [1954], p. 15.

---

## ABSTRACTS

This article addresses one very specific aspect of the Enoch Powell moment of 1968: how, in the letters of support that the radical right leader received in the wake of the so-called ‘rivers of blood’ speech, Britons vituperated against the Elites as embodied by the British Broadcasting Corporation. The BBC was in the eyes of Powell’s supporters hell-bent on promoting a multiracial Britain that they were averse to, as well as striving to silence the voice of disgruntled ordinary Britons, who construed their collective identity as that of a ‘silenced majority’. The BBC was also blamed for being a key player in the British ‘permissive society’ of the 1960s. Eventually, this paper ventures a few reflections on the afterlives of Powell’s moment as covered by the BBC, be it in 2008 (‘The White Season’) or in 2018, when BBC4 broadcast Powell’s infamous speech amidst fresh controversy.

## INDEX

**Chronological index:** années 1960

**Subjects:** histoire politique, médias

**Geographical index:** Grande Bretagne

**Mots-clés:** BBC, Enoch Powell, racisme, correspondance

## AUTHOR

### OLIVIER ESTEVES

University of Lille, CERAPS UMR 8026

Olivier Esteves is a professor of British Studies / Political Science. His research mostly focuses on issues of race, ethnicity, stigmatisation, the radical right and Islamophobia in the UK, with a growing interest in the U.S. and France. His most recent books are *The ‘Desegregation’ of English Schools : Bussing, Race and Urban Space* (Manchester University Press, 2018) and *Inside the Black Box of ‘White Backlash’ : Letters of Support to Enoch Powell* (forthcoming with Routledge in 2022). He launched and coordinates the research project ‘French Muslims in Global Space : Stigmatisation, Expatriation, Integration?’, funded by University of Lille / I-Site ULNE.