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REBELS WITH A CAUSE

EARLY POLITICAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE UK

As Jessica and Eric turned more of their attention to the UK, they observed how racism affected significant areas of the lives of Black people who, like themselves, were from British colonies. Whether in housing, education, employment or law enforcement, discrimination was blatant. The Black people with whom they came into contact were “citizen[s] of the United Kingdom and Colonies” - that is what was written in their passports - but it was of no consequence to the gangs of White youths who roamed the streets and often attacked them in the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1958, the so-called “Notting Hill riots” saw “Keep Britain White” mobs, 300- to 400-strong, many of them Teddy boys armed with iron bars, butcher’s knives and weighted leather belts, going “nigger hunting” among the Caribbean and African residents of west London. Black people fought back, it took five days before it was over. A year later, in May 1959 a young carpenter from Antigua named Kelso Cochrane was killed by a group of White men in Kensal New Town.

Politicians blamed Black people for causing the attacks and for being in the country. A Conservative MP in Nottingham and the Labour MP for North Kensington suggested immigration controls to limit the number of Black people entering the UK. This linkage of immigration and race continued into the 1964 election, when the Tory candidate for Smethwick took an openly racist stance to fight for the parliamentary seat with the slogan: “If you want a nigger for a neighbour vote Labour” The election was won by the Labour Party but the Smethwick seat went to the Tory candidate.

Four years later, a Commonwealth Immigration Act was rushed through parliament and became law in March in 1968. It prevented holders of British passports from automatic entry to the UK unless their parents or grandparents were born, adopted or naturalised in the UK. This legislation was clearly biased in favour of White people from the British dominions of Canada, New Zealand and Australia.

Conservative MP Enoch Powell added to the anti-immigrant hysteria by giving what became known as his “Rivers of Blood” speech in Birmingham in April 1968. In it, he predicted a future of heightened racial tension, that large numbers of Black and Asian people using the UK’s services would limit access to the White population and that the dominant power would shift to the Black population. The speech was condemned by most of the British media and many politicians. Edward

Heath sacked Powell from his Shadow Cabinet the day after his speech. Margaret Thatcher agreed with the sentiments of Powell's speech, and though she thought his choice of words was unwise she did not agree with his sacking. There was, however, strong support from dockers in London's East End and Smithfield porters, all of whom were White. They took strike action and marched in their thousands to Westminster carrying signatures endorsing Powell. Articles were published in the tabloid press, showing popular support for Powell's sentiments expressed by "ordinary" members of the White population up and down the country. A Gallup Poll in 1969 reported that he was the "most admired person" in British public opinion.

Attacks on members of the Black population in different parts of the country increased after Powell's speech. This violence had been legitimised by the speech of a "respected", elected politician. The police offered no protection, nor were any of the attacks thoroughly investigated.

The Huntleys continued their interest in international matters, though their attention became even more focused on taking action to change Black people's conditions and to raise their awareness. They were particularly concerned about Black children living in a xenophobic country such as Britain. Jessica had been brought up to be confident and to take pride in herself as a Black woman, she worked well with people and was a persuasive public speaker. Eric, as a seasoned campaigner for equality, had a strong trade-union background. Using their experience of political activism, they worked with grassroots organisations to improve Black children's education and Black people's social conditions in the UK.

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