

「LDN」 Anthony Hugh Mills

My title is the same as that of a song by the popular British singer, Lily Allen. The song describes the mixed feelings that London residents have about their city. Allen sings about the buzz and fun of city life, while at the same time pointing out its more negative side. In many ways, that is also what I want to do in this essay. I spent a year in London from April 2005 until March 2006. Some things I saw were enlightening and interesting but others were difficult to come to terms with.

I learned a lot about the variety of London. I was studying about London immigrant groups and I made regular visits to the British Library near King's Cross station. The quickest way for me to get to the library was to take the subway, and if there were no strikes or mechanical/technical problems (which there often were) the journey took about an hour. However, if I went to the library by bus, although the travel time doubled, I saw a very different picture of the city. Each area along the route attracted a different community of people and I had this wonderful chance to see how these communities fitted together and worked, instead of rattling past beneath them in the dark.

I lived in Wimbledon, which is full of Australians and South Africans. Colliers Wood, the next area, is the home of Tamil people from Sri Lanka. Tooting has a mixed, vibrant population from India, Pakistan and, Bangladesh. It is home to one of the largest Islamic communities in London. As I moved on into Streatham, I saw the shops and clubs of the Polish and Italian immigrants who came to the UK shortly after the Second World War. The bus then went down a long hill into Brixton, home to a large Caribbean community and still infamous for the rioting that happened there in the early 1980s. The next stop was Vauxhall, which has a thriving gay community. The bus then crossed the River Thames to enter the heart of the city and I saw the ornate, colonial architecture that reflects Britain's past as a major imperial power.

All of this, then, was interesting and exciting. I was discovering at first-hand some of the very things that I had come to study.

However, there were other aspects of what I was seeing that were more distressing. I had last lived in the UK in 1991 and it seemed to me that things were very different now in 2005. The dividing lines between people seemed much wider than they used to be. The rich flaunted their wealth more and the poor were more bitter. There was less trust of other people than there had been, particularly among different ethnic and national groups and the white British population. People seemed to be scared of young people. Alcohol and drug abuse were much more prominent. Prices were ridiculously high compared with Tokyo.

Some of these negative impressions were stressed one day in early summer. In Japan, 7th July is famous for the tanabata festival. It is also my birthday and my wedding anniversary, so it is a day that has some personal significance. On 7th July, 2005, I stayed at home. At 0850 in the morning, three bombs exploded simultaneously on the London Underground, one of them just outside King's Cross station. An hour later, another bomb exploded on a bus in Tavistock Square, which is a few minutes' walk away. Fifty-six people died in these bombings, including the four people who had been carrying the bombs.

It was soon discovered that the four bombers were Moslems from the North of England. They were 18, 19, 22 and 30 years old. Later investigations discovered videos and other texts in which the bombers spoke of the blame the west, especially Britain, must take for the suffering that had been inflicted on them and on the communities they identified with. These included Moslem communities all over the world, in Iraq, Chechnya, Afghanistan and Pakistan, as well as the UK.

These bombings made me wonder again about the extent to which British people have grown apart from each other. Britain has always been known as a country divided by social class, but in recent years politicians and commentators have increasingly claimed that class no longer exists as a useful and honest way of defining the groups in British society. They say that we have all become middle-class. The Anglo-Pakistani author, Hanif Kureishi, in his 2005 essay *The Word and the Bomb* has this to say about what is important in (British) society these days;

In the post-war period race – and now religion – have become subjects around which we discuss what is most important to us as individuals and as a society, and what scares us about others. I tend to agree with Kureishi, but at the same time I question whether the class question has really disappeared – or whether it is simply hidden and presents itself in a different form.