

“See no evil..?” Time Out / 20th August 1997



The flip side of affluent, Blairite Islington is a fearsome world of graffiti-scarred, gang-ridden council estates, where violence can erupt at the drop of a yoghurt pot. When one woman witnessed a brutal stabbing and dared to speak up in court, she lost more than her sense of security...

It's a hot and sticky night in Upper Street, Islington, home of the beautiful and cosmopolitan. People spill out from the wine bars, restaurants, theatres and cafes in the heart of N1, itself centre of the world's trendiest city, secure in the knowledge they're surrounded by their own kind. Few give even a cursory glance as they pass the seedy late-bar opposite the fire station; the name, Murrays, flashing in tawdry neon, never gets a mention in the style press. Entry is free, and anyone can get in. But inside, the atmosphere is of barely concealed aggression. The bar, all pink lights and mirrors, is used by twenty something gangs from the other side of N1: estates like the Packington, Barnsbury and the Marquess. They are the disenfranchised, invisible Islingtonians.

The Marquess Estate on Essex Road, N1, is a short walk from Murrays via genteel Canonbury, one of

Islington's most affluent areas. The estate is a huge maze of graffiti-scarred underpasses, walkways and stairwells—an inner-city cliché. To those living there, it is a close-knit community, where petty feuds can spiral into fatal violence. Thus last year, from an incident as inane as the throwing of a tub of yoghurt, Scott McMullins was brutally murdered. McMullins, a likeable 20-year-old, lived in Archway, but he regularly visited his family on the Marquess Estate. Rumours circulated that his sister lived with a black man - this, in a part of London where black and brown faces are barely tolerated. The bad blood between him and youths on the estate culminated in the bloodletting. As he left his sister's flat, the yoghurt was thrown, words were exchanged and in a frenzy of violence the 20-year-old was killed. Certain that they were untouchable on their own turf, the five youths responsible stabbed and kicked McMullins to death in broad daylight in full view of other residents.

'It was horrible, absolutely horrible. The police say the first knife wound killed him, but they just kept on stabbing him. Then they were kicking him around like a rag doll. From his neck up, every bone was broken.' Jean, a long-term Marquess resident, didn't know Scott very well, but she and her partner, who attempted to revive him, knew both his family and those of his assailants. The identity of the killers was common knowledge in the area, and the youths were arrested (and subsequently convicted). As the trial

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neared, tensions on the estate were cranked up ever higher.

'In the months leading up to the trial,' remembers Jean, 'loads of people from the estate came up to me, asked if I was going to testify. I said I was, and some of those people became more threatening. They'd shout abuse at me, said they'd burn me out if I testified, stuff like that. My partner also had his car wheels tampered with. It was terrifying.'

Soon, even going to the local shops became an ordeal, as Jean and her family were subjected to intense intimidation. What began as a whispering campaign became increasingly vocal. Finally, two weeks before the trial, the police advised Jean and other witnesses to leave the estate for their own safety. 'Twenty years I'd lived on that estate, bringing up a family. I've got a son aged 23, and a 21-year-old daughter. Now we can't even go back to see our friends. And in the three years before I got moved, I spent between £10,000 and £12,000 on the place. I'll never get compensated for that now.'



In communities such as the Marquess, an intimidating place at the best of times, there is an immense stigma to being labelled a 'grass'. The police are rarely seen on the estate, but gangs of youths are usually hanging about in the green areas and stairwells, and young heroin addicts openly sell knock-off goods. Jean even admitted that had the incident been between two gangs of youths, she wouldn't have said a word: 'But it was five onto one, that's why I had to speak out; that's not fair. I just kept thinking: that could have been my boy. I hope any other mother would understand.'

But what hurt Jean more than having to flee her home was the impact it made on her family. With most of her possessions in storage, she has been moved to a drab police safe house outside London, far away from the area she lived in all her life. The house is empty of all personal effects, and with no car and miles to the shops, Jean feels lost and alone. And, as if her enforced isolation weren't bad enough, her elderly father is ill, and needs constant care; but for health reasons, she has only been able to see him twice in four months.

'I used to be his main carer, but now I have to leave it all to my sisters. The main problem is that he can't travel, for obvious reasons. So I ring him three or four times a day. It's my only real contact with the outside world, and it costs a fortune in bills. I feel like I'm in prison, just for doing my public duty.'

Jean was moved by the police

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under the witness protection scheme. She spent six months in a cramped bed and breakfast, where she was forced to share a bed with her twenty one year old daughter: 'It was a nightmare in that place. We started to argue all the time. I ended up walking the streets all day rather than sit in that room.' Christmas, 1996 was the worst she'd ever had: 'That was the first time in over twenty years I hadn't been with my family. I'm used to lots of people being around, but last year I had to spend it on my own.'

Islington Council was legally obliged to re-house Jean. And that was where the real problems began. 'The trouble is,' says Rob Storey, Islington's beleaguered press officer, 'we have around 40,000 properties, but only about 1,600 - 4.4 percent - of these are street properties. We feel she (Jean) is being unreasonable in demanding a street property when the fact is, there just aren't enough to go round.' 'And for one reason or another,' adds Islington's housing spokesman, 'many of our street properties are in poor repair. Most of the best ones were sold off to well-to-do types years ago, and yet we are constrained from spending the money which that generated on our housing stock. It just doesn't make sense. But we did offer Jean a decorating allowance.'

In January, having refused all of Islington's offers of re-housing, Jean found herself effectively removed from the housing register. She sought the advice of solicitors, and one court case has followed another, with the growing interest of the media and the public at

large. Jean opens a large, black bin-liner which she says is full of letters of support, including ones from some very well known people who can't be named until after the High Court case against Islington Council on September 23-24. After which, win or lose, Jean plans to go public: 'I don't want any money. I just want everyone to know how this Council operate. What does it look like in court? Tony Blair comes from Islington, after all-is this how New Labour treats its people? And what kind of message does this send out to the public at large? If you help put away murderers, you will suffer, and maybe even end up homeless. It's going to put off a lot of people from testifying, and murderers will be left walking the streets.'

The police agree. 'If people think they are going to lose their homes by testifying,' says a spokeswoman, 'They will be more reluctant than ever to come forward. We can't promise to re-house people, all we can do is liaise with the local authority and put as much pressure on them as possible.'

Yet while Jean has reasonable grounds for complaining that by doing her public duty, she is being made to suffer, Islington Council feels it is constrained both by her rigid demands and by financial restriction. In an ideal world, Jean would get a place just as good as the one from which she was forced to move-a place, as she herself puts it, where she can feel 'at home'.

'I sometimes have to pinch myself. I can't believe this is happening,' says Jean. 'I know what it's

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like to go to hell-you can't imagine how it feels to lose your security, past, home. I feel I did my bit for society, and got smacked in the mouth. I put two murderers away and I feel like I'm the one in prison.'

Some would say estates like the Marquess are prisons; and the comparisons don't end with the brutal architecture. Once you get a flat there, an exchange is almost unheard of, and Thatcher's right to buy counts for little when no one wants to buy your property. A little over 100 days have gone by since the night of the general election, when they danced with joy in the wine bars of Upper Street, while in the walkways and tunnels of the Marquess there was silence.



Top cats and underdogs

What can New Labour do to eradicate 'the wrong side of the tracks'?

They don't like the word 'underclass' in Westminster; 'social exclusion' is the preferred term for those perceived to be living on the periphery of, if not outside, society. Now a special underclass unit has been established by the Cabinet. Its aim: to enable everyone 'to participate in the economic, social, cultural and political

life in Britain today', as Peter Mandelson put it to the Fabian Society last week. It is hoped that the coordinated anti-poverty measures will have a swift impact nationwide. But Messrs Mandelson and Blair don't have to look very far to find people excluded from this New Britain: they live cheek-by-jowl with the New Labour cognoscenti in Islington.

The Blairs may have gone from Richmond Crescent, but the core of New Labour still remains: Margaret Hodge MP and Heritage Secretary Chris Smith still live in that centre of yuppified Islington, Barnsbury. Yet just a short walk from this green oasis lie the Bemerton, Naish Court, York Way Court and Barnsbury Estates. America's curse of street-by-street socio-economic stratification is nowhere more apparent than here in London N1.

Two pubs symbolise the stark divisions. The Albion in Thornhill Road, caters for Islington's upmarket crowd; with its brass fittings and secluded, flower-scented beer garden. Just down the street in Caledonian Road (or 'The Cally' as everyone locally calls it), the Edinburgh Castle caters for the estates-the light above the pool table is smashed, chairs slashed and broken, and there's an old, fuzzy TV.

Michael, grey-haired, 58 and an Edinburgh Castle regular, left school in Sligo, Ireland at the age of 12. He slept rough for years, finally getting a short-life flat first in York Way then Wynford House, which is just yards from Richmond Crescent. Some of his

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friends live even closer to the PM's former residence: 'Some of my friends live in Richmond Crescent as well. They're on the dole, and often go for days without eating. The toilet doesn't work, so they have a washing up bowl in the front room.' Michael himself has had his share of problems: lost giro, thefts and ill health. Even after years on the streets, he was shocked when he first moved to the area. 'There's a lot of poor folk around The Cally. I've seen some terrible things round here. I knew one guy on the Bemerton who was dying. These two fellers went in and cashed his book while he lay there in soiled sheets. I found him lying in his own muck. I called the ambulance, but it was too late. As far as I know, they're still cashing his book, even after he's dead.'

The Bemerton is home to people like Kelly, only 19, unable to live on the £3 an hour she makes sweeping up in a hairdressers; there is, as yet, no sign of Labour's promised minimum wage. The temptations for Kelly to follow her friend into the world of crack dealing are intense. Drug abuse in the area is rife and some of London's most notorious gangs live here.

In Thornhill ward, which includes the Bemerton, the official rate of unemployment is 17.3 per cent. In Barnsbury, which includes both Richmond Crescent and Wynford House, it is 13.8 per cent. The figures for other crime in the area are just as discouraging. The Cally/ King's Cross area has some of the highest rates of crime nation-wide. A recent survey by

household insurers Eagle Star identified Islington as having the highest burglary rates in the capital. Tony Blair's old home was burgled five times.

Pat, a local caretaker, shows me round his estate. 'You're always finding syringes, crack bottles and stuff. I used to have to step over the crackheads just to get to my flat.' Pat has seen it all in his job. All, that is, except the one thing he dreads the most: 'I'm terrified that one day I'll find a dead body on my rounds. But I wouldn't be surprised, not at all.'

