



Roxana Willis

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The Broadwater Farm riots, 40 years on

*The Broadwater Farm riots in north London were at the forefront of the struggle for racial justice in Britain. Forty years on, **Roxana Willis** recounts the social and political context to the events through the testimony of Sharon Grant, and outlines the lessons for confronting racial injustice in Britain today.*

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On 6 October 1985, the Broadwater Farm estate in north London was at the forefront of the struggle for racial justice in Britain. Forty years on, members of the LSE community and the wider public joined to remember the Broadwater Farm riots and its legacies. Many of the issues that fuelled the riots – such as rampant socioeconomic inequality, police racism, and racialized violence – continue to confront black communities in Britain today. Yet powerful resistance and effective community activism in the face of racial injustice also lives on.

We were fortunate to be joined by Sharon Grant, who lived closely through the riot and its aftermath, as an academic, an elected councillor, and partner of the late Bernie Grant, then leader of Haringey Council and one of the UK's first black MPs. This piece summarizes the events as Sharon shared them with us [at LSE on 1 October 2025](#).

Racialized politics in the 1980s

For us to understand the Broadwater Farm riots, Sharon suggests that we must think back to what Britain was like in the 1980s. Margaret Thatcher's government was in the flow of dismantling the post-war consensus, which involved shrinking the welfare state and reducing funds for local councils and their communities. As unemployment soared, especially for young black men, public

housing policy led to the segregation of black families in under-resourced estates like Broadwater Farm.



These harsh living conditions were exacerbated by the racialized political discourse at the time, which included Thatcher's infamous assertion in 1978 that Britain was "swamped" by immigrants.



Sharon explained how the estate's residents, between 60–80 percent of whom were black, faced daily hardships: leaking roofs, broken lifts, damp flats, and limited control over their housing. These harsh living conditions were exacerbated by the racialized political discourse at the time, which included Thatcher's infamous assertion in 1978 that Britain was "swamped" by immigrants. This imagery fed into aggressive, discriminatory police operations like "Swamp 81" in Brixton, which led to hundreds of black men being stopped and searched by the police over a series of days. Sharon describes this period of policing as "heavy-handed, humiliating, and deeply racialised."

Sharon points out a series of warnings about the consequences of deep racial divide in the years leading to the Broadwater Farm riots. These include the 1981 uprisings in Brixton, Toxteth and Handsworth. In 1983, Colin Roach died in suspicious circumstances in police custody, which many in the black community did not believe was suicide. In 1985, unrest flared again after police in Brixton shot and paralysed Cherry Groce during a search for her son. Only a week later, on 5th October 1985, police violence surfaced again, this time on the Broadwater Farm estate.

The death of Cynthia Jarrett, and the night that followed

On 5 October 1985, police raided the home of Cynthia Jarrett, a black mother of five and a well-respected member of the Tottenham community. The raid was prompted by a minor traffic incident her son was charged with only days earlier. While police trampled through the family home, Cynthia collapsed and died of heart failure.

Cynthia's death was a breaking point. Collective grief on the estate turned to protest. On the evening of 6th October, the outpouring of sorrow and protest turned to anger and riot. Tensions between residents and police escalated into violent confrontation. Among other casualties, PC Keith Blakelock was tragically killed during the disorder.

Bernie Grant in the eye of the storm

Sharon and Bernie Grant, the leader of Haringey Council, were attending a civic event when news about the riots broke. Bernie knew Broadwater Farm well, having worked tirelessly on the estate on local economic initiatives, supporting improvements to housing, and participating in youth engagement.

Bernie became a spokesperson for what happened that night. Sharon recalls that, instead of merely condemning the violence, Bernie sought to explain the conditions that led to the riot. He explained the collective rage, the daily despair of youths, and the wider context of aggressive policing which made the uprising possible if not inevitable.

In his efforts to explain the position of the black community, Bernie soon became a target of press critique, described by one newspaper as the "high priest of race hatred". Racist hate mail filled Bernie and Sharon's letterbox for some time.

As Sharon recounts, Bernie stood firm. He refused to turn his back on the people who had elected him. In return, local people supported Bernie, first by voting for him in the 1986 local elections, where Labour strengthened its majority in Haringey, and then by electing Bernie to Parliament in 1987.

The fight for justice & the Tottenham Three

In the aftermath of PC Blakelock's death, the police launched an operation to find those responsible. Homes on the estate were raided, hundreds of people (many of them youths) were arrested, and legal representation was reportedly denied. Sharon recounts some of the worst abuse as involving children who were "arrested and kept naked in cells for days without representation, forced into making dodgy confessions to be released." [Amnesty International](#) heavily condemned these actions.

The conviction of Winston Silcott, Engin Raghupathi, and Mark Braithwaite—known as the "Tottenham Three"—for the murder of PC Blakelock was one of the most high-profile miscarriages of justice that occurred. Despite initial appeals being rejected, the Broadwater Defence Campaign, a local community group, fought for years to have the case reconsidered. With support from Bernie, the

group kept public attention on the case through media engagement, letter-writing, and activism. In a symbolic act of solidarity, Winston Silcott was **elected honorary student union president** of the London School of Economics.

As a result of the persistent community activism, the Home Secretary eventually referred the case back to the Court of Appeal in 1990. All three were acquitted.



Independent black voices matter – In 1985, a strong black press played a key role in challenging injustice and amplifying community voices.



When the government refused an official inquiry into the Broadwater Farm riots, the Council, under Bernie's leadership, commissioned its own: the **Gifford Report**, published in 1986. It laid bare the social and economic roots of the unrest and detailed the police misconduct and judicial failings that followed.

A Legacy That Speaks to Today

So what are we to make of Broadwater Farm, four decades on? Sharon imparts the following vital lessons:

- 1. Documenting lived experiences is crucial** – We know what happened because people made deliberate efforts to record events carefully.
- 2. Independent black voices matter** – In 1985, a strong black press played a key role in challenging injustice and amplifying community voices.
- 3. Police accountability is still lacking** – From the Stephen Lawrence case to the death of Joy Gardner, serious issues remain, as highlighted in the Casey Report. Stop and search powers continue to be misused.
- 4. Defence of human rights must be protected** – Attacks on “woke activist lawyers” threaten those who defend civil liberties. Without such lawyers, the Tottenham Three might still be imprisoned.
- 5. Youth in communities of colour still face marginalisation** – Genuine dialogue between police and these communities remains rare.

Yet Sharon also acknowledges that vital progress has been made, which is apparent in the growing recognition of diversity and more platforms for engagement than ever before – the [Bernie Grant Arts Centre](#) offering one such example. New technologies have also facilitated the creation of the [Bernie Grant Digital Archive](#), which ensures community-driven history is preserved for generations to come.

“Remembering with empathy”

There is no better way to end this piece than with Sharon’s own words:

“As I stand here forty years on, I feel both sorrow and pride. Sorrow for the lives lost, for the suffering endured, for the wounds that still scar our communities. But pride too – pride in the resilience of those who refused to be silenced, pride in Bernie’s courage, and pride in the legacy of struggle that has carried us closer to justice, even if the journey is not complete.

Broadwater Farm must never be reduced to a headline. It must be remembered as a cry from the margins – a cry of pain, frustration, and alienation. But also, a cry that called this country to account in so many ways.”

If you wish to learn more about Broadwater Farm and related issues, please explore the [Bernie Grant Archive](#).

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About the author



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Roxana Willis is Assistant Professor of Law, at the LSE Law School. Her research investigates the legal system through the prism of structural inequality, with a focus on class and race. Roxana’s first monograph, *A Precarious Life*, presents a long-term “ethnography at home” on a disadvantaged housing estate in England.



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