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‘Thirteen Dead and Nothing Said’

The early 1980s were a turning point in British politics. The post-war consensus, which had been under strain for some time, finally gave way to political polarization and the politics of confrontation. Anti-immigrant sentiment gained new legitimacy with the election of Margaret Thatcher’s government in 1979. The Tories had overtaken Callahan’s government in the polls soon after Thatcher’s 1978 interview for Granada TV’s *World in Action*. The interview tackled the subject of immigration head on. Speaking to Gordon Burns, Thatcher made a point of seeking to address the purported grievances of those driven to voting National Front. Thatcher said she understood ‘that people are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped with a different culture’ and declared that she would not allow ‘false accusations of racial prejudice’ to stop her from tackling the ‘problem’ of immigration (*World in Action*, 1978). True to her word, a white paper was produced within a year of her election and a new British Nationality Act hit the statute book in 1981, further restricting the right of Commonwealth citizens to settle in the United Kingdom. Clearly, the politics of race played a significant role in Thatcher’s victory.

Those on the Tory Right with a track record of opposition to immigration were emboldened by this climate. On 2 January 1981, right-wing Conservative MP Jill Knight was reported as calling for ‘noisy’ West Indian parties to be banned, following a New Year’s Eve party in her constituency which had allegedly gone on for days. A veteran member of the Far Right Monday Club, which advocated voluntary repatriation of immigrants and defence of white minority rule in South Africa and Rhodesia, Knight appeared to suggest that local whites would be entitled to take direct action to stop such parties (*The Guardian*, 17 January 2011; Manzo 1998: 151).

Two weeks later, in the early hours of Sunday, 18 January, a terrible fire started at a birthday party held at 439 New Cross Road in Deptford, South London. Thirteen young people aged between 14 and 22 lost their lives and many more

were injured; all were from the African-Caribbean community. The 14th victim, Anthony Berkbeck, who had survived the fire by dropping from a first floor window, was tormented by the memory of what he had seen. His body was found at the foot of a block of flats 2 years later where he had taken his own life (Steele 1993: 218).

Howe quickly became involved in the movement determined to force the political establishment to acknowledge the horrors of the New Cross Massacre, to conduct a full and fair inquiry into the causes of the blaze and to bring the perpetrators to justice. He was elected by an impromptu grass-roots assembly to give the emerging movement shape. In the tense period following the fire where official misinformation abounded, he played a central role in dealing with the press and the authorities. In the run-up to the Black People's Day of Action, Howe embarked on a whistle-stop cross-country tour, ensuring that New Cross's tragedy became a national campaign. The worst catastrophe ever experienced by the black community was destined to prompt the largest demonstration of black political power Britain has ever seen, when 20,000 black people marched through London on 2 March 1981 to protest at police, media and government response to the fire.

New Cross Massacre Action Committee

Howe received word of the fire on the day that it happened. He was at a meeting with John La Rose, founder of New Beacon Books, and Jessica and Erica Huntley, who ran the Walter Rodney Bookshop and the radical literary publishers Bogle L'Ouverture. The meeting had been called at La Rose's home in Finsbury Park to discuss the proposal to hold a Book Fair of Radical and Third World Books. The planning would later come to fruition in the week-long literary festival which took place in April 1982 at Islington Town Hall and whose success led to it becoming an annual event thereafter (Alleyne 2002: 58).

On hearing of the fire, the meeting ended. Howe, La Rose and Roxy Harris, of the Black Parents Movement, made their way to the Moonshot Youth Club in Pagnell Street, New Cross, where the survivors had gathered in the early hours of Sunday morning. Sybil Phoenix, who ran the Moonshot, had arrived at the scene of the fire while bodies were still being carried from the building. Phoenix had been asked by the police to try to find people who had been at the party to help identify the badly burned bodies. She was to play a crucial role supporting the bereaved through the devastation of the days and weeks that followed.

Howe and La Rose met Mrs Gee Ruddock, who had organized the party to celebrate her daughter, Yvonne's, 16th birthday. Yvonne perished in the fire. Paul, her 22-year-old son, received fatal burns, dying in hospital 3 weeks later. La Rose later recalled the meeting and the Radio interview with Ruddock in the Moonshot. The interview was broadcast live on Alex Pascall's daily 'Black Londoners' Radio Programme:

In spite of her agony and suffering she spoke to us because she had already heard Radio reports that weren't true. She said that it had been a peaceful party. There were no fights. It was the first party she had given in the house. She'd made a special concession to her daughter, Yvonne for her 16th birthday and she was glad she had because she had never seen her so happy before. (1984: 7)

Howe also remembers that Ruddock was 'lucid, obviously drowned in grief, but in full control of her faculties' (NS, 12 April 1999). Mrs Ruddock and the other survivors all spoke of the party's relaxed atmosphere, at which the 17-year-old Gerry Francis, another of the fire's victims, played the latest reggae tracks on his sound system while Mrs Ruddock superintended the house.

Ruddock told Howe without hesitation that the blaze was caused by a fire bomb attack. Police officers had told her twice, within the first couple of hours of the fire, that it had been caused by a petrol bomb. The first officer to point to arson was on the scene outside the house, the second at King's College Hospital. Other witnesses reported the suspicious behaviour of a man who pulled up and drove off in White Austin Princess. Four days later, the *South East London Mercury* reported that the police were trying to trace the driver of the vehicle which was parked outside the house (22 January 1981).

The horrific events of that night took place in an area known to many as the race hate capital of Britain. Indeed, New Cross had been the scene of pitched battles between the National Front marchers and anti-fascists just 4 years earlier. Invoking the memory of an earlier fire bomb attack on a black party which had left 22 people injured, Joan Anim-Addo recalled 'every black family's nightmare, anticipated by a history of racist threats and actual attacks such as the Sunderland Road fire-bombing a decade earlier, materialised in the news of the dead and injured' (1995: 136).

Howe and La Rose were not the first activists on the scene. Already the West Indian Standing Conference had called a public meeting for the following Sunday. Howe and La Rose proposed that a planning meeting be called on Tuesday 20 January at Pagnell Street. Expecting a couple of dozen seasoned activists to turn up for the Tuesday meeting, Howe was astonished when 300

people came from as far away as the Midlands. The meeting established the Black People's Assembly, or General Assembly as it was known, a body open to everyone who supported the general aims of the campaign. The Assembly met every week. It heard from the survivors of the fire, discussed the troubled history of the black community in Deptford and addressed the question, as Howe puts it, of 'what has to be done?'. In concrete terms, the Assembly's role would be to make recommendations to the New Cross Massacre Action Committee (NCMAC), a body open to Asians, Africans and West Indian activists, who would decide how to carry them through. The Assembly also set up a trust (administered by Alex Pascall and John La Rose) to receive money to organize the funerals for those killed in the fire. In this way, community participation was maximized, the more politically minded could join the NCMAC, while those who were less willing to take a political stand could still demonstrate their solidarity with the grieving families by making a donation to the Parents' Committee.

The immediate aims of the campaign were to establish a Fact Finding Committee which would take statements, gather evidence and oversee the police investigation, and to call a press conference in response to the misleading reports which were beginning to appear in the press. The minutes of the first NCMAC meeting, which took place immediately after General Assembly, record that members of nationalist Pan African Congress Movement (PACM) tried to have Asians and whites excluded from the public and general assembly meetings. Lela Hassan spoke against this, pointing out that Mrs Ruddock was of Indian heritage herself. Another activist objected on the grounds that some white and mixed race youths had been at the party and had been injured in the fire. Howe said the public meeting should be open to everyone. An undercover researcher for the Policy Studies Institute who was carrying out 'participant observation' for a study of relations between the Metropolitan Police and black community, funded by the Met, later reported:

when feelings were at high pitch and many (especially younger) people sought revenge and confrontation, Darcus Howe, speaking from the public platform, said that while it may be the desire of many people to vent their anger indiscriminately on sections of the white population, a better course of action would be "to turn our emotional rage into better channels".

(1983: 141)

Howe called for the black community to organize itself against racist and fascist groups and 'for the widespread involvement of the black community in the

political processes which affect the quality of our lives'. Linton Kwesi Johnson and Frank Crichlow supported Howe's position and his call for public and General Assembly meetings to be open to all races. As a result, the PACM motion was defeated (La Rose 1984: 7).

Passions had run high at the beginning of the meeting when Lewisham Police Commander John Smith arrived uninvited to address those present. His words were drowned out by shouts of 'Go away murderer!'. Smith, who was described by the *Mercury* as visibly shaken by the experience, later called his reception 'rather sad' (22 January 1981). Flanked by Scotland Yard Press Officer, Bob Cox, he left the building without speaking. The fact that Smith and his Force prompted so much anger is hardly surprising considering the widely held perception that the Met had failed to investigate a string of suspected racist attacks in the area properly. The Met's failures, particularly when dealing with suspected arson, were legion. The Moonshot club itself had burnt down in December 1977 a few weeks after reports of it being identified as a target for attack during a local meeting of the National Front. Nonetheless, the police excluded arson as a possible cause (*SELM*, 16 December 1977). Similarly, South London Press openly criticized Greenwich Police's decision to rule out foul play when The Albany Theatre in Creek Road, Deptford, burnt down in August 1978. The suspicion that it was an act of arson aimed at a theatre which hosted a number of anti-racist events against the National Front in the run-up to May local elections of that year had increased when a note was received by those who ran the theatre saying 'Got You! 88'. This was interpreted as being from the neo-fascist paramilitary group, Column 88. When the police ruled out arson without being able to offer any alternative explanation for the fire, local anti-racist activists conducted their own investigation during which they were told by the local Fire Officer that he was 90 per cent sure that the fire had been started deliberately as the theatre's newly installed lighting had been switched off at the mains when it had begun (*SELM*, 28 December 1978).

A week after the New Cross fire, 2,000 people arrived for the public meeting from as far afield as Bradford, Manchester and Leeds. At this point, Howe knew he was witnessing something unprecedented. John La Rose chaired the mass meeting, and Howe spoke on behalf of the Race Today Collective along with other representatives of black organizations such as BUFP and Black Panther Movement, as did Lesley Morris and others. After the speeches, Sybil Phoenix led a march from the mass rally to 439 New Cross Road along a route she had agreed with the police. In the week after the disaster, Phoenix and her co-worker

Ros Howells had performed a vital role in supporting the families who had lost children in the fire and of liaising with outside agencies on their behalf. According to John La Rose, after the march arrived at 439 New Cross Road, Phoenix began a chorus of 'We Shall Overcome' and then tried to lead those assembled away from the house along the agreed route. Only 50 or so followed her. The remaining 2,000 continued to occupy New Cross Road for 3 or 4 hours (1984: 8).

Those, including the police, who were hoping that the influence of militant black organizations would diminish and the movement brought under the control of the more 'respectable' publicly funded Community Relations Council and Commission for Racial Equality, had misjudged the public mood. The black working-class youth who assembled in their hundreds did not so much draw their inspiration from the songs and example of the civil rights movement of the early 1960s as from Black Power and Bob Marley's injunction to them to 'Get up, stand up, don't give up the fight'.

'A general strike of blacks'

At the next meeting of the Assembly and NCMAC on Tuesday 27 January, the decision was taken to call the Black People's Day of Action to be held on a working day and school week, Monday 2 March 1981. Howe advocated a deliberate break with the Left's convention of calling national demonstrations on Saturdays in order to maximize attendance. Howe later explained the reasoning behind the date of Black People's Day of Action:

I said "Well if they are going to kill so many kids in a fire, we have to show them we got some power in this place, and the only way to do that is to call a general strike of blacks."

(Phillips and Phillips 1999: 328)

The General Assembly and NCMAC voted for Howe, along with fellow members of Race Today Collective, to organize the Day of Action, and it was agreed that Howe would go on a speaking tour of the country to build support for the 2 March protest. The new movement acknowledged that with the Mangrove campaign behind him, Howe was best placed to play this central organizing role. Furthermore, the Collective had consciously reached out beyond London and worked with black groups in places such as Bradford, Leeds and Bristol. Having been elected, Howe packed a bag and headed for Liverpool. At the same time, the

NCMAC printed and distributed 36,000 leaflets across London alone publicizing the Day of Action. From that point, Howe was to play the central role in the Day of Action. For Johnson, 'Darcus's' role was crucial: he was the main organizer. We all played our part, but Darcus was in charge of the mobilization. In terms of the actual committee, that was John La Rose. Darcus was 'the General', John La Rose was 'the Field Marshall' (Johnson 2011).

The new movement was a coalition of different forces, including some more moderate figures and groups from Deptford itself. Leading figures included Grenada-born Ros Howells, who had set up the Mothers Project out of the Moonshot club to help support underage mothers and respond to what she called 'the problem of children having children'. As the project grew, Sybil Phoenix had persuaded her to become a full-time community organizer. On the night of the fire, Howells went to the hospital to support the victims and their families. Now Baroness Howells of St David's, having been made a Life Peer in 1999 for a lifetime of service to the community including the family of Stephen Lawrence, she had this to say of the march and Howe's role in organizing it:

I did not share Darcus or the other activists' revolutionary politics and being in a mixed relationship did not lend itself easily to being an activist in militant black politics. So I wasn't fronting the march. But I was very much in favour of it and of the criticism levelled at the police. I became very politically involved. I was in the background working with the families, explaining why it was politically important for the black community to make a statement with the march. . . . People like John la Rose and Darcus clearly had a political motive for getting involved, but I would say to you it was the best political motive.

(Howells 2011)

The sense of urgency within NCMAC became more intense as the Fact Finding Committee began to confirm their worst fears about the police investigation (GB 2904 NCM 2/1/1/4). The initial emphasis on tracing the driver of the White Austin Princess was dropped. This coincided with the discovery that Inspector Graham Stockwell, who had been instrumental in reinstating the incitement to riot charges against the Mangrove Nine, was now heading up the investigation. Stockwell's 'form' was not lost on the campaigners. Sybil Phoenix expressed her rage at the appointment during a press conference. Looking back, Howe is convinced that the decision to put Stockwell in charge of the investigation was essentially 'a political decision, because he knew some of the characters in the game'.

Press reports began to appear, sourced to the police, which suggested that the fire had begun within 439 New Cross Road. Equally, the national press started to misrepresent the movement that had emerged following the fire. For example, the *Daily Mirror* of 26 January 1981 purported to give an account of the demonstration following the mass meeting the night before under the headline 'One cool cop calms a mob'. The article omitted to mention anything about the meeting itself. Rather, it provided a sensational account of the march to 439 New Cross Road and ended on the note that the fire may have been started by someone at the party (*Daily Mirror*, 26 January 1981).

The Fact Finding Committee also began to receive reports that the police were detaining the young survivors of the fire, in some cases without their parents' permission; worse still, the detainees stated that they had been pressurized into signing statements saying the fire was the result of a fight at the party. Typical of such reports was the account of 11-year-old Denise Gooding, whose 14-year-old brother Andrew had died in the fire. She was questioned in a police station for many hours before finally being released at 1 a.m. During the interrogation, she was repeatedly told by officers not to lie, just to tell them there was fighting in the house (Phillips and Phillips 1999: 334). NCMAC would eventually expose how child witnesses were made to sign false statements under police duress at the Inquest into the fire, by which point the Met had abandoned the theory of a fight as the cause of the fire altogether. However, as La Rose later pointed out, the movement had been forced to 'exercise every ounce of alertness and vigilance to stop the police framing a group of young blacks who were at the party' (1984: 5).

Spurred on by these events, Howe began his speaking tour. Once again he deployed the organizational strategy that he had learnt during his time with Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In each locality, Howe would 'pick people out' and form a small committed group who would, in turn, inspire others. This was the method he had learnt from Fred Meely, Gwen Patton and Rap Brown during his stint in New York. By doing so, he sought to translate the widespread anger which he knew to exist in the black community into mass action on 2 March. In this sense, there was a direct continuity between the Black People's Day of Action and SNCC's initiatives such as Freedom Summer of 1964 or march to Greenwood Mississippi in 1966 which were organized in this way (Ture and Thelwell 2003: 302). Indeed, the Race Today Collective functioned in much the same way that the SNCC had. Both groups were in essence a collection of mobile organizers, who aimed to bring local activists together in each town they visited, and in so doing, generate effective local campaigns.

Howe recalls the dozens of meetings he attended across the country in February 1981, sometimes three or four in one day:

I would go to a town, say Liverpool and visit Toxteth and I went to the CRE's office and they told me where other small organisations were, some political some social. I had been known in the country because of Race Today and the Mangrove and all of that. Then I went to Preston, I didn't know Preston had any black people, but a Liverpool guy said "Lets got to Preston." So I went there, and did the same.

(Howe 2011f)

In Moss Side, Howe linked up with Gus John, chair of Manchester branch of Black Parents Movement at the time, who accompanied him to other meetings across the North, including Sheffield, Huddersfield and Leeds. On the Day of Action, John would bring six coach loads of protestors and a large number of cars from Moss Side alone to the demonstration.

Howe continued:

I then held meetings across the midlands in Nottingham and in Birmingham where I had invitations to speak to a Pakistani groups I had contacts with. I remember thinking after the first meeting, this is a waste of time, they are not ready for the cross over yet. I wasn't interested in speaking to seasoned left wing groups, I wanted to excavate and channel the real movement I knew was happening all over the country.

(Ibid.)

From there, Howe visited Luton and Bristol and was planning to visit Southampton, when Hassan asked him to come back to London because they were overflowing with requests for speakers. Howe returned and found himself addressing meetings of 200 or 300 black students at campuses all over the Capital every day. This, Howe notes, was the first time in British history when large numbers of black students had entered further and higher education. The mood that he encountered was extraordinary. The black students he met were determined to make a difference, they knew, he recalls, that 'this was their moment'. Johnson was also involved with the mobilization, speaking with La Rose at universities and FE colleges. Students, as Howe recalled, played a crucial role holding parties to raise money for the Day of Action.

The sense of anger among a new generation of black Britons in the schools, colleges and in the streets was palpable. No letter of condolence had been sent to the families of the New Cross victims by the Queen or Prime Minister. The lack of official concern was thrown into stark relief by the government's

reaction to the death of 45 people at the Stardust discotheque in Dublin on Valentine's Day 1981. In response to the Irish tragedy, Parliament was adjourned and letters of sympathy were sent immediately by both the prime minister and Queen. It was not until 2 weeks later, a full 5 weeks after the New Cross fire, that a letter was sent by the prime minister. Even then, the message was not addressed to the parents of the deceased but to Sybil Phoenix. Thatcher's letter acknowledged the tragedy, but asserted the police were doing everything they could to investigate it. John La Rose articulated the outrage of the black community when he wrote as chairman of NCMAC to the prime minister to say they considered her letter a 'serious and calculated insult' (Declaration of New Cross 1981).

By late February 1981, 70,000 leaflets and 10,000 posters had been distributed nationally (Policy Studies Institute 1983: 142). Howe recalls that by this point he was thinking that if 5,000 people could be mobilized on a week day, it would be the largest and most significant march of its kind ever held; if anywhere in the region of 10,000 were to demonstrate on 2 March, it would be a serious challenge to the state on this issue.

The police and the media

plenty paypah print pure lie,
fi bline joe public eye

Linton Kwesi Johnson, *The New Cross Massakah*, 1981

As the Day of Action drew closer, Howe became locked into tense negotiations with the authorities over the route and date of the march. Howe and La Rose headed a small delegation which met with Inspector Pollinghorne, who had been placed in charge of policing the march, at Brixton Police Station in late February. The proposed route of the march went from New Cross over Blackfriars Bridge, through the City and Fleet Street, past Scotland Yard and the Houses of Parliament before finishing in Hyde Park some 17 miles later. The route was symbolic. It had been picked so the protestors could express their disapproval at the distorted press coverage of the fire, protest at the police's handling of the investigation and so that the parents of the dead and members of NCMAC could hand in a statement to Parliament voicing concern at the lack of a government response. Pollinghorne objected to the length and route of the march and said it should go through the Old Kent Road, a route which the campaign had already rejected. Howe defended the NCMAC's preferred

route, which had been designed to maximize the support and participation of the black community by going via Camberwell and Peckham. Pollinghorne demanded to know how long it would take the protestors to walk the 17 miles. Howe replied: 'you're a military man, Inspector, we plan to advance a mile a day'. At this, Pollinghorne walked out. The meeting lasted barely 5 minutes.

Russell Profitt, the Labour Councillor whose ward included 439 New Cross Road, was drawn into trying to mediate between the council and police on one side and Howe and the NcMAC on the other:

It was a very tense and difficult time with little by way of common ground on which to work. Darcus at that time – in my view – saw himself as a conduit of the concerns of young black people in particular and the wider black community in general so had no wish to go against their demands. Council leaders were not in favour of a week day march and wanted to see a de-escalation of the tensions all round. The police who were being criticised for lack of action and causing a cover up to be perpetrated were also not in compromising mood.

(Profitt 2011)

At Town Hall meetings, Profitt argued that with feeling running so high it was essential that the march went ahead. Profitt's status as a local councillor for many of the fire's victims, together with his links with the wider community through his role as the first secretary of Lewisham Community Relations Council and Deputy Head of the local Primary School, meant he was uniquely placed to speak to the concerns of the wider community. His view that it was essential that the march proceed, so local 'concerns were expressed as urgently and in as public a way as possible', eventually prevailed.

Profitt was right, the situation was volatile. But appealing to raw emotion was not part of Howe's strategy. An audio recording of Howe speaking in the run-up to the Inquest shows him speaking slowly, deliberately, choosing his words. He opened by stating his desire to be 'cautious and diplomatic' in his approach. He even went as far as to appeal to the police, 'the feeling of blacks in this country is that this is a God-almighty-mess, and we warn the police not to compound it by the manner in which they behave. . . . It is not too late for them to review their strategy in regards to the calling of witnesses.' Throughout the press conference, Howe was determined to let the facts speak for themselves, deferred to the wishes of the grieving parents and formulated his criticisms of the police precisely. (IRNAA 16 April 1981 Transcript).

Despite having the formal go-ahead for the protest, NCMAC members briefed local organizers to expect the police to try to frustrate participation on

the day. Citing examples from earlier demonstrations and carnivals, speakers advised local activists to be prepared for police to delay coaches coming into London or close down local transport on 2 March 1981 as they had unexpectedly done to New Cross station on 25 January 1981.

With only 5 days to go before the protest, an article was published in *Daily Mail* on Wednesday 25 February 1981 headlined 'Killer Blaze Charge Soon', which suggested that a number of black young people had been arrested and would soon be charged in connection with the fire. The story was picked up by ITN and appeared in its news broadcasts later that day. The NCMAC responded immediately by contacting the police who confirmed that the story was 'completely untrue' and that the only black people to have visited Lewisham Police Station about the fire had gone there voluntarily to give witness statements. The NCMAC issued a press statement to the Press Association that evening which condemned the confusion which the article had 'deliberately sought to create', before going on to observe:

The New Cross Massacre Action Committee has warned the entire public that the police are likely to arrest some blacks on the eve of Black People's Day of Action on Monday 2 March to divert attention from the Demonstration and weaken the Day of Action. The Daily Mail story and ITN news today have served that purpose.

(Declaration of New Cross 1981)

Formal complaints failed to reveal the police source of the bogus story. For Howe, the publication and timing of the story was not a surprise; it was Fleet Street's tradition to act as 'public mouthpiece' for the police in their dealings with the black community. The press performed that role with gusto in its reporting of the Mangrove demonstration as it had done in earlier police investigations of racial crime dating back to the murder of Kelso Cochrane in May 1959.¹

NMAC and Howe spent the following days anxiously waiting to see if the *Mail* article and ITN report would seriously affect attendance on the day.

The Black People's Day of Action

Howe recalls that the weather on the morning of Monday 2 March was beautiful; not cold but temperate and bright. He arrived at Fordham Park next to the Moonshot in good time and watched the marchers assemble in awe as wave upon wave came down the hill into the valley to join him in the park. Buses,

organized by the NCMAC, kept arriving carrying black people from across the country. Among those who gathered for the march that day was the young lawyer and political activist Paul Boateng. In the same year, he was elected as a councillor for Greater London Council, before going on to become an MP for Brent South in 1987 and the United Kingdom's first black government minister in 1997:

I was struck, first of all, by the numbers, the vast numbers, who were assembling in south London, in Lewisham, on that day. . . . In the main, if you look at street demonstrations, even street demonstrations around issues that affect black people, you get a sense that white people were in command of events. They'd organised it. This was black organised, black led and you felt that. So it was very much a black community event.

(Phillips and Phillips 1998: 242)

The march had been planned carefully. The stewards, who wore identification berets, were briefed by Howe to show discipline and restraint in the face of police provocation, 'otherwise the march would collapse into a mass violence and the point would not be made'. With the Collective acting as chief stewards, he knew that if anything went wrong 'we would be held responsible'. Johnson recalls, his job was looking after 'all the rude boys, making sure they didn't rob places' (Johnson 2011). Howe took up position on a lorry containing public address and sound system at the front of the march. Next to him were his 8- and 7-year-old sons, Darcus Beese and Rap Ture Howe, together with other speakers, drummers and the families of the deceased. Howe would later learn that his daughters Tamara and Tenifa were among the hundreds of school children who walked out of their schools to join the demonstration.

The police had said they wanted the march to start at 11.30 a.m. At 11 a.m., Howe called over to one of the officers and said 'Let's go' in the hope it would upset any plans they might have to disrupt the march along the route. It was tactical flourishes like this which led Linton Kwesi Johnson to christen Howe with the nickname 'General'. Tactics aside, Howe opines that the police were unprepared in a second sense. From studying James, from his experiences in the Caribbean and America, from travelling the country during the Lindo Campaign, from the Basement Sessions, and his run-ins with the police, Howe was prepared for the Day of Action. The event was unprecedented, but Howe's years of experience organizing campaigns and his theoretical understanding of the dynamics involved in mass protest meant that he was as prepared as anyone for the march. The police, by contrast, had no idea what they were

dealing with. 'They underestimated us. . . . They thought we were a load of little, stupid, black people.' The police were caught off guard by the scale of the march and the sophistication of the organization. 'There had never seen that size demonstration of black people before. So the police didn't know culturally what to do' (Howe 2011f).

As the march set off along New Cross Road, Howe could see that many thousands had missed school or work to protest. By the time that the front of the march arrived at the remains of 439 New Cross Road half a mile away and stopped to pay its respects to the 13 young lives lost in the inferno, the tail end of the march had not yet left the Fordham Park. Of the chants that rang out, three in particular stood out: '13 Dead Nothing Said'; 'Stockwell is a Liar, a Bomb caused the Fire' and 'Come what May, We Are Here to Stay', the slogan which had adorned all the leaflets, badges and posters publicizing the march.

Ros Howells's abiding memory is of her daughter and niece, both university students at the time, at the front of the march. 'The anger and hurt was visible among the young people, for many of them it was the first time they could get their parents to understand what they were going through. Young black people couldn't breathe without being criticised and attacked in the media.' As the march snaked through the South London streets in which the victims had lived and gone to school, its numbers swelled as children climbed over school fences and onlookers left their jobs to join the demonstration. Howells recalls:

. . . people who were working on buses and school children who were at school came to join the march. I mean conductors literally got off the bus and joined us. As we marched through Peckham children left their schools to join the march and teachers had no control over that.

(2011)

As the mass of people passed through Southwark towards Blackfriar's Bridge, Howe and the organizers estimated that somewhere in the region of 25,000 people may have been on the march. When the chief stewards tallied their numbers together at the end, the final figure they arrived at was a little over 20,000. Howells sensed that the police were frightened, that they had never seen anger from the black community on this scale before and that the movement which had mobilized that day 'shook them to their roots'.

When the march got to Blackfriars Bridge, it started to shower lightly. A small delegation consisting of John la Rose and the victims' families left the head of march to take their protest to Parliament. A group of about 50 young people at the front of the march pressed ahead and overtook the lorry only to

find they were confronted by rows of police blocking the entrance to Blackfriars Bridge. The police were determined to stop the demonstration from crossing the bridge. The bridge was symbolic. This was the first protest march since the Chartist Procession of 10 April 1848 to attempt to cross Blackfriars Bridge and the police were determined to block it. As a result, fighting broke out as the youth struggled to break through the police lines and fought to free comrades arrested by the police. One eyewitness account archived at the George Padmore Institute describes what happened next:

... Runners amongst the stewards were despatched to bring forward the truck trapped way back from the pitched battle. Chaos was increased as contradictory directives were issued by the police commanders. As Lewisham police tried to ease a way for the truck to move forward, the City police continued with blocking manoeuvres. The impasse was broken as the truck nosed its way through the seething mass, Rasta flag flying aloft. Strengthened now by the presence of the lorry, the crowd with one last heave laid siege to the police line, and with a resounding cheer, broke through the cordon.

Johnson recalls that the impasse was broken by a surge from the 'lumpen elements' of the crowd scattering the police (2011). Among those arrested during the melee by police officers who called him a 'cunt' and 'bastard' was the Policy Studies Institute undercover researcher who was writing a police-funded study of young black attitudes towards the police (1984: 149). Marchers interviewed by Dave Evans for LBC radio clearly viewed police action on the march as unnecessary and provocative.

Russell Proffitt, the Labour councillor whose had done so much to overcome opposition within Lewisham Council to the march, was among the thousands of protestors who crossed the bridge. He considers the confrontation at Blackfriars Bridge as predictable, given the strength of opposition within the police to the route. By the same token, he knew it was only a matter of time before the marchers would get across the Bridge; 'we had literally come too far to simply turn around and make our way back' (2011).

Once they had crossed the Thames, the protestors regrouped and continued their demonstration through the City and into Fleet Street. Marching in tight formation past the Red Tops and broadsheets, the protestors offered up the cries of 'Thirteen Dead and Nothing Said' and 'Fleet Street Liars'. All the participant accounts concur in reporting abuse that the marchers received from the offices in Fleet Street. Paul Boateng later recalled 'the taunting and abuse that rained down on us from the *Express* building in particular, I will never forget that'

(Phillips and Phillips 1998: 342). Johnson remembers that as they passed by *The Sun* newspaper ‘there was a torrent of racial abuse from people working in the building . . . “Go Back Home you Black Bastards”, the usual banal kind of things that these people say’ (Ibid). Howe recalls seeing people leaning out of windows making ‘monkey noises’ and throwing banana skins at the crowd (Howe 2011f).

Against the chants of ‘Justice, Justice’ and the jeers of journalists, Fleet Street also saw renewed confrontation between the protestors and the police. The eyewitness account held at the GPI claims ‘in Fleet Street the whole mood of policing changed. The police imposed themselves on marchers, pushing, shoving, and kicking people off pavements. Scuffles broke out up and down Fleet Street, and, unlike Peckham, it was the police and not the stewards who stood guard in front of shops.’

In an isolated incident, which the vast majority of protesters were oblivious to, one small group broke off from the demonstration to smash and loot a jeweller’s shop. As police tried to stop them, an officer was injured. This was the incident that dominated the newspapers the next day. In fact, despite the aggressive police tactics, of the thousands who marched that day, only 25 were charged with minor offences by the police.

There continued to be clashes and altercations with the police for the remainder of the march. Eyewitness accounts criticized the police tactic of riding police horses into families with young children at Cumberland Gate in an apparent attempt to break up the march and stop it reaching Hyde Park. Notwithstanding the provocative methods used to police the march, it did finally reach its destination at Hyde Park 7 hours after it had set out from Fordham Park. Thousands of protestors gathered around the lorry to listen to speeches by Howe and others. Against great opposition, the marchers had triumphed. But Howe was not given long to savour the triumph before the backlash began.

Note

- 1 Olden details how police officers sold information about Cochrane’s murder to the *Sunday Express* before his next of kin had been informed of his death and then furnished *The People* with misleading and inaccurate information which was used in an unsympathetic profile of the victim entitled ‘Gang Victim Led Double Life’ (2011: 83, 152).