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Insurrection

From its conception, Howe had intended the Day of Action as a challenge to not only the insouciant racism of police and government as illustrated by their response to the Deptford Fire but also to the way the press had misled and misinformed the public about the Fire. With that background and given the taunts and abuse which had rained down on the marchers from the office blocks in Fleet Street, a less than warm response in the next day's press might have been anticipated by Howe and the organizers. Nothing could have prepared them for the massive hostility which was to follow, as the press attempted to unite the majority white population against the justice of their claim.

Yet try as they might, the press and police could not diminish the newfound confidence which the march had instilled in the black community. As Paul Gilroy has noted, detailed research into police attitudes to People's Day of Action reveals that they saw the success of the march as 'a symbolic defeat' and complained that black people had a new swagger in their step after that demonstration (Phillips and Phillips 1998: 347).

Police efforts to assert their power in the wake of the march through tactics such as the saturation policing of immigrant communities and habitual stop and search of black people would now be met with widespread resistance. 'Operation Swamp 81', whose sobriquet appeared to deliberately echo the term used by Thatcher to describe immigration in her notorious 1978 World in Action interview, was ostensibly called 6 weeks after the march to combat street crime in Brixton. It involved the indiscriminate, and therefore illegal, stop and search of 943 mostly black people by 120 plain clothed officers over the space of 5 days beginning on Monday 6 April. Only 2 per cent of the 'stops' resulted in the detection of street crime (Simpson 1982: 13). By Friday 10 March 1981, this assault on the people of Brixton, unprecedented in its scale, aggression and intensity, had succeeded in igniting a mass youth insurrection against the police. In its initial phase, the uprising in Brixton lasted just 3 days,

Figure 6 Howe leading the demonstration on the Black People's Day of Action, 2 March 1981. Howe is accompanied on the truck by two of his sons, Darcus Jr. and Rap.

but it spread in weeks and months that followed to Southall, Liverpool, Bristol and Birmingham and approximately 60 other cities by the summer of that year (La Rose 1984: 18). In the area known as Liverpool 8, for example, a history of police harassment and racism exploded in a mass uprising which did not die down completely for a period of 6 weeks during which hundreds of buildings were burnt down, 781 police officers injured and 214 police vehicles damaged (Frost and Phillips 2011: 2).

As the most effective black political organization, the Race Today Collective under the direction of Howe, John La Rose and Leila Hassan, had been instrumental in organizing the People's Day of Action. Now it was from their offices in Shakespeare Road, at the corner of Railton Road, Brixton, that Howe and his comrades would witness and experience the police repression which sparked the uprising on 10 April 1981 and would be entrusted with the task of telling the real story of the uprising by those who had led it.

Backlash

As Howe left Hyde Park after the 2 March demonstration, he was asked by a reporter for his response to the People's Day of Action. Avoiding triumphalism,

but pleased that so many people had left work and school to join the march and that it had passed off without any major incident which could detract from the dignity of their purpose, Howe simply said 'It was a good day.' In an article which was to set the tone of the press coverage the following day, the *London Evening Standard* published a picture of Howe alongside another photograph of a policeman with blood streaming down his face and the headline 'Race Chief's Verdict on Protest March: It was a Good Day.' Howe later remarked that on seeing the article he thought 'we can only draw this fight, can't win it' (Phillips and Phillips 1998: 343).

The *Daily Mail's* headline that morning read 'When the Black Tide met the Thin Blue Line.' Likewise, the *Daily Express* described what it called 'the rampage of a mob'. Not to be outdone, the *Sun* ran the headline 'Black Day at Blackfriars.' Inside the paper featured a two-page spread entitled 'The Day the Blacks Ran Riot in London.' It went on to claim that

... a cordon was thrown across the bridge in an attempt to halt the march. But militants angrily chanting "Murder, murder, murder" bulldozed their way through with a five-ton truck. As it was driven relentlessly through the police ranks the mob charged across the bridge. Then the rampage began as thousands of blacks stormed up Fleet Street. Urged on by militants on the truck they hurled brick and smashed shop windows.

(*The Sun*, 3 March 1981)

This crude appeal to fear and prejudice prompted a formal complaint to the Press Council and a finding 6 months later that the *Sun* article was inflammatory and 'damaging to good race relations', the first such ruling against a Fleet Street newspaper (Anim-Addo 1995: 138). National press coverage of the event appears to have relied exclusively on the police accounts and briefings, thus following the same pattern of 'reporting' which the yellow press adopted during the Mangrove demonstration a decade earlier. There was no mention that the police made only a couple of dozen arrests, the vast majority on minor charges such as obstruction; or that many of those arrested had been random victims of police snatch squads, among them an undercover researcher writing a police-funded report on police-community relations who was sworn at and bundled into the police van as he tried to cross Blackfriars Bridge.

Only New Cross' local weekly newspaper, the *South East London Mercury*, carried balanced reports of the demonstration. Its articles, entitled 'A Plea for Justice' and 'A Day to Remember: "Stand Firm. We are marching in dignity"' by Marhita Wearing are vivid first-hand accounts of the demonstration. An opinion

piece entitled 'Day of Dignity' pointed out the significance of the march as 'the biggest gathering of black people this country has ever seen':

They came to tell the rest of the country how they felt – not just about the terrible loss of life they had suffered. But about the discrimination they suffer, the fruitless search jobless youngster's face, the problems so many children face in schools. Judging from national newspaper coverage of the march, they haven't managed to bring their protest home, with the Press concentrating on the tiny minority of hotheads who broke away to fight police and rob shops and passersby. But the vast majority of people demonstrated their anger with dignity, their frustration noisily but peacefully, their sense of tragedy with emotion.

(5 March 1981)

The march appears to have prompted a brutal, atavistic response within the police. Research funded by the Metropolitan Police into police behaviour at the time reveals how the Deptford Fire and its aftermath 'had the effect of focusing racist attitudes within the Met' (Smith and Gray 1983: 116). Unlike the report on black youth which formed the second part of the same study and was written using undercover researchers, the police officers with whom David Smith and Jeremy Gray spent 2 years in the company of knew their purpose but were still prepared to express the most violent racist views to them. Gray and Smith cite five separate conversations in work and social settings (an office party, lunchtime drinks in a pub) involving different groups of up to eight police and CID officers to the rank of chief inspector in which extreme racist views were expressed in response to the Deptford Fire. A typical example of the comments was when Gray was asked by one officer 'how many niggers actually fried in this barbecue at Deptford, then?'. At a CID office party, Smith heard a number of anti-IRA jokes, before being told that they have renamed Deptford as Blackfriars. During the discussion in a pub with eight officers, one constable who had policed the march the day before expressed the view that it had been a defeat for the police before boasting that he 'managed to hit a nigger in the mouth' (holding out his hand to show a mark). That discussion ended with the officers all agreeing that black people 'were animals' and 'that they should be shot' (Ibid.). In a discussion with another group of officers at the same police station later that day, a chief inspector is reported as saying 'If a nigger's coming straight at you, you can put a .38 straight through him and he'll keep coming' (Ibid., 123).

Gray refers to one of the PCs and the same chief inspector talking about 'the return match' or 'second leg' at which they hoped the police would 'get a better score' in reference to a second march scheduled for following Saturday – but which in fact never took place (Ibid., 117).

Howe before the riots

Even for a veteran activist and organizer such as Howe, being at the epicentre of these events and experiencing the juxtaposition of emotions associated with the success of the People's Day of Action and the bitterness of the backlash that followed had a profound effect. As at other crucial moments, Howe looked to C. L. R. James to provide him with perspective:

I think everybody after that demonstration had to assess who they were; what side they were on. . . . In fact when I was getting a bit over-hyped with it, my uncle CLR James was my political mentor, said to me "I think you ought to retreat. Just calm down, take two steps back, because this is big stuff." I said that we needed some overview to moderate extreme and violent instincts, because there was violence that was obviously beneath the surface. It manifested itself weeks after the demonstration.

(Phillips and Phillips, 1998: 240)

Approaching middle age by this point, Howe had a stable and happy personal and political life. He was in a loving relationship with his close friend and comrade Leila Hassan which remains to this day. Between editing *Race Today* and his political and family commitments, Howe even found time to fulfil an ambition to teach when he was asked to lecture part-time at South London Tec. No doubt conscious that Howe would be a good role model to many of his young black students, the College's Head of General Studies, one Mr Burke, wrote to Howe asking if he would teach a class of mainly first-generation Caribbean youth who were struggling with grammar. He recalls that one of his students, a young Rasta called Berris, who couldn't read, gave the impression to his classmates of being very tough but clearly liked Howe's no-nonsense approach. As the better weather approached, Howe told Burke that he wanted to organize a day trip for the class to Margate, which prompted Burke to ask Howe if he was crazy, but to which he eventually agreed against his misgivings. Howe recalls it was a fine day and was going well, until he saw his students 'thieving from some shops on the front'. Howe called all his class together and said 'all of you to the bus now if you don't want to be left behind':

. . . they all came, because no one wants to get left behind in Margate. I told them to turn out their pockets and then made them go from shop to shop returning what they had taken. Anyhow Berris started crying, he said his father had never taught him that.

(Howe 2011g)

Despite the happy domesticity of his personal life and fulfilling professional life, Howe could tell there were seismic shifts taking place within the black community. In their Basement Sessions, the Race Today Collective set out to analyse the contours of these shifts and changes within the community so they might be better placed to respond to the social explosion they considered imminent. In so doing, their aim was not to try to lead or move the community into mass revolt. Consciously breaking with Leninist notions of revolutionary leadership, Howe and the Collective lived the Jamesian maxim that 'All movement flows from self movement and not from external forces acting on an organism.' As an external force, the Collective saw its role in Brixton as knowing who the community were, helping to connect its struggles and reflecting this back to them so that the community might better understand itself. They were, in Howe's words, 'careful to avoid trying to lead people outside of their reality' (Ibid.).

At its 1980 national conference, members of the Collective instructed Howe to write a series of articles for *Race Today* which would prepare its readership for the impending revolt. The first of these was published in May 1980, just a month after the uprising in St Paul's district of Bristol, and the second article appeared in the November 1980 edition. Together they fluidly analysed the early struggles of the black community against police and state racism, of the police's transformation from 'Bobby to Babylon'¹ during the course of October 1958 Notting Hill race riots and of the incipient forms of resistance associated with Black Power. Howe noted that the first generation of West Indian immigrants were constrained in these early battles by the fact that they were a minority and could not guarantee what whites would do in any major struggles against the police.

What had changed since the Notting Hill race riots of the late 1950s or in the decade since the trial of the Mangrove Nine to lead the Collective to predict a major uprising of black youth with such confidence? For one, young black people no longer feared white reaction. In Bristol, significant numbers of white youth had joined black protesters in attacking the police, and a third of those arrested had been white. By the end of the 1970s, the music and style of a new generation of black British youth spoke directly to the alienation felt by breakaway sections of white working class youth, students and urban poor. In the schools and on the estates of Britain's major cities, there were young disaffected whites who identified directly with the countercultural values of ska, reggae and punk, saw themselves as part of the same rebellious youth culture as black young people and shared their hatred of police and state.²

Army of Occupation

No good general ever declares his forces in a prelude to any attack Commander Adams, "L District".

(Bays et al. 1981: 6)

Thus answered Brixton's most senior policeman on national television when he was asked why he had not informed the local Police-Community Liaison Committee prior to an 'attack' by the Special Patrol Group (SPG) in Brixton in 1978. The comment was cited at the start of the report of the Working Party on Community-Police Relations which was published by Lambeth Council in January 1981 following an 18-month inquiry into the troubled relations between police and local community, particularly the black community. In a section entitled 'Army of Occupation', the report referred to six such attacks by the SPG on Brixton from 1975 and 1979, involving up to 150 officers at a time, in which the same general pattern was followed each time – road blocks, early morning raids and random street checks. Describing the situation as 'extremely grave', the report anticipated the possibility of unrest.

The Working Party's report made a number of urgent recommendations to defuse tensions, including the immediate repeal of Section 4 of the Vagrancy Act or 'sus', which gave the police the right to stop anyone they suspected, and for there to be no future deployment of the SPG in Lambeth. Submissions referring to police abuses during the interrogation of juveniles said the Working Party 'present a picture of violence, intimidation and induced confessions', thus necessitating basic reforms such as the need for a parent or guardian to be present for any statement given by a juvenile in custody to be admissible as evidence.

It has taken 30 years since the Working Party's report for those directly involved in such abuses to begin speaking out. In a Radio 4 programme to mark the 30th anniversary of the riot in which Howe, Alex Wheatly, Brian Paddick and others participated, BBC script writer, Peter Bleksley, described his experiences as a young constable in Peckham at the time (BBC, 25 March 2011). Among one of the first to arrive at the scene of the riots, Bleksley recounted how young black men in Brixton and Peckham 'were routinely fitted up, beaten up, tortured and worse' by police. Describing how the culture of the police had turned him from 'a decent 18 year old boy' from Bexleyheath into 'a violent racist, very unpleasant thug', Bleksley recalled how young Rastafarians would have their dreadlocks ripped out by police and how these would then be pinned to police notice boards as trophies. Asked by the programme's host

Sue MacGregor to elaborate on his claim of having witnessed torture, Bleksley described how young black people would be made to kneel with their toes on the skirting boards of police interrogation rooms at which point pressure would be applied and their heels forced downwards causing excruciating pain until they agreed to sign confessions. The Working Report's devastating conclusions were ignored by the police and the political class. Commander Adams had withdrawn police cooperation with the Working Party's inquiry at the outset citing alleged bias against the police even though the inquiry's chairman was a senior QC, David Turner-Samuels, and the Working Party contained Labour and Conservative councillors (BBC, 25 March 2011).

Swamp 81

It was in this tense atmosphere, just 3 months after the Working Party's dire warning to the police and 6 weeks after the mass mobilization of 2 March 1981, that the police launched Operation Swamp 81. Howe recalls the sudden influx of 120 plain-clothed police officers, dressed in jeans, T-shirts and sneakers, onto the streets of Brixton and the harassment and intimidation experienced by the community as they randomly and aggressively stopped and searched hundreds of black people:

I know what a swamp is. It is water up to your knees, an attempt to overwhelm and corner you. It was happening in front of my eyes. This was an attempt to reassert police authority. That is what empirically was taking place. I don't like writing politics in term of conspiracies but this happened.

(Howe 2011g)

Hassan recalls being stopped with Howe on Railton Road as they made their way towards Brixton market to buy some yam and sweet potatoes to make soup:

The police approached us and said "where are you going?" Darcus went mad, he said "why are you stopping us?" . . . Everyone was talking about it in Brixton, you couldn't go anywhere without being stopped. It was overwhelming, the sheer numbers of police involved. You'd be stopped and searched at the end of your street and then stopped and searched by a different set of police dressed in jeans and T shirts as you got to the next bloc. It was unbelievable, they stopped young, middle aged, elderly, families, men and women – anybody.

(Hassan 2011)

Howe remembers the incident on Railton Road:

They shouted “come here, where are you going?” I replied “Go to hell. Law says I have be doing something suspicious. What is suspicious about going to buy sweet potatoes?” Across the road, I saw a couple local hustlers, Tarzan and Boy Blue. They shout “Darco what?” I shouted back “Dunno”. They came across to see what was happening and the police got back in their car and pulled off. Swamp ’81 was an assertion of power without reason. I wasn’t going to stand for that. I wasn’t a boy to be ordered around and my wife treated as a pip-squeak. I would have rather died than be treated in that way.

(Howe 2011g)

By the end of the first week of Swamp 81, local organizations were overwhelmed by complaints from black youths at their treatment by the police. As the Scarman Inquiry would later hear, police claims that Swamp 81 was not an attack on the black community were undermined by the fact that while whites outnumbered black people 3 to 1 in Lambeth, the majority of stops were of local black people and the overwhelming complaints of police abuse and intimidation were made by Lambeth’s black citizens (Narayan 1985: 140).

On Monday night, Howe and the rest of the Race Today Collective met in their Shakespeare Road office to discuss the situation. Howe argued that the place was going to explode and that there was no way people would tolerate police harassment on this scale. In the following days, Howe witnessed a series ‘of pushings and shovings’ and scuffles break out between black youth and the ‘sneaker squad’, as Howe referred to the casually dressed, trainer-clad officers. As tension inexorably rose,

You would see and hear it time and time again . . . a young black would get grabbed and would shout “What you pick on me? Me never doing nothing you blood clot!” The “sneaker squad” was drawn from Brixton, Clapham, Stockwell police stations, which were dumping grounds that contained the detritus of the Met. They reminded me of the police I encountered when I first arrived in the UK. They were racist thugs. Those stations got the chance to host this operation and seized it.

(Howe 2011g)

Howe remembers one local youth, Ben, seeking him out and asking what he was going to do about what was happening on the streets. Howe replied, ‘What can I do?’. On the night of Friday 10 April, a local youth, Michael Bailey, was stabbed. In a practice no longer allowed, he was placed in the back of a police

van and taken away to be treated. Onlookers saw a black man who was bleeding heavily being driven off in a police van. Such was the fear and loathing of the police that onlookers assumed that police were responsible for Bailey's injuries. The incident immediately sparked violence – bricks and bottles were thrown, several cars were overturned, several officers received minor injuries and a small number of arrests were made. That night police held talks with church and 'community leaders' urging them to calm the situation but refused pleas to call a halt to the Swamp 81. In so doing, they refused to take the only action that could have averted serious disorder.

Brixton had experienced unrest of this order before. Significantly, however, word of the confrontation and of what sparked it spread like wild fire. The writer Alex Wheatle, whose novel *East of Acre Lane* is set against the backdrop of the riots, was living in a hostel in Peckham at the time. In the Radio Four Programme to mark the 30th anniversary of the riots, he recalled that he was at a Blues party not far from Railton Road that night, where everyone was saying that 'Babylon whet up a sufferer'; in other words, the police had stabbed someone. Wheatle stayed up all night talking about it with others in the hostel and they decided to go *en masse* on Saturday morning to Brixton and later joined the revolt (BBC 2011).

The fire this time

When a group of black youths gathered to protest at the search of a black mini cab driver by officers on Atlantic Road on Saturday afternoon and police retaliated by arresting one of their number, it ignited a volatile situation. Howe later heard that it was Ben, the youth who had approached him a few nights earlier, who had begun remonstrating with the two policemen at their unlawful use of stop and search and whose spontaneous protest grew into mass revolt when police tried to quell it. Over the course of the next day, Brixton saw the most widespread rioting in Britain that century and the first ever use of the petrol bomb on mainland Britain. Howe would later describe 'the serious insurrectionary proportions of the revolt', 179 vehicles were damaged and 34 vehicles destroyed, 415 police and 172 members of the public injured, 28 premises damaged or destroyed by fire; 7,472 police used to police the area. Leeson Road, Mayall Road, the northern part of Railton Road and the streets to the west of there were in the hands of local youth for hours as they resisted

police attempts to advance and counter-attacked in dramatic style. In one incident which Lord Scarman described as 'illustrative of the aggressive spirit of the crowd and the defensive posture imposed on the police', a group of youths commandeered a bus and drove it up Railton Road towards the police line as others charged on foot shouting and throwing bricks: when a policeman threw a brick and smashed the bus windscreen, the youth who was driving it jumped out and the bus veered into the right of the police line before coming to a rest on a wall at the top of Railton Road (Scarman 1981: 56).

As in Bristol, a significant minority of the insurgents were white; Scarman later reported that white men were seen making, distributing and throwing petrol bombs in Railton Road and Leeson Road on Saturday night (Ibid., 75). Despite the scale of the street fighting and arson, its violence was consistently targeted at the police and commercial property; local homes were left unscathed. Bill Bowring, the local Labour councillor whose Herne Hill ward included Railton Road, remembers moving freely from house to house visiting his constituents during the riots to ensure they were safe, including in those streets that the insurrection controlled. Now a professor at University of London, then a young white lawyer and part-time labour activist, Bowring 'never felt under threat' as he moved among the black youth (Bowring 2011).

Similarly, Scarman heard evidence from a local priest, the Vicar of St Jude's of how he tried to intervene to stop a group of black men attacking The George, a pub on Railton Road, and a newsagent opposite. He was told by the men 'that the police have been harassing the black and homosexual communities and they could stand it no longer'. The George had a reputation for refusing to serve black people, earning it the nickname 'Rhodesia', and the newsagents for discriminating against a group of gay men who lived on Railton Road (Scarman 1981: 75). Although initially spontaneous in nature, Scarman concluded from such evidence an 'element of leadership and direction quickly emerged' (Ibid., 74).

Anticipating a revolt after the Friday night clashes, the entire membership of Race Today, with the exception of Linton Kwesi Johnson who was attending a conference in Amsterdam, met throughout the weekend at their Shakespeare Road headquarters. Located in the heart of the insurrection, less than a minute's walk from Railton Road, they monitored events closely while Johnson remained in frequent contact by telephone. For Howe, having a slew of police camped in the road outside his office had its benefit in that it could not be credibly claimed that he was on the streets coordinating the unrest.

This did not stop the *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* from publishing reports in the aftermath of the uprising which referred to Howe and *Race Today* as local agitators whose role in the unrest should be investigated. In a recently declassified briefing prepared for the prime minister and Cabinet in July 1981 after the riots had spread to at least 20 other cities, the contribution of 'extremists' in sparking the initial Brixton uprising was openly discussed. Referring to Howe as someone who, as editor of *Race Today*, was associated with campaigning for H-Block Hunger Strikers and the New Cross Massacre Action Committee, the report ultimately concluded that 'it seemed unlikely that in any major case the extremists have actually instigated the violence or been able to plan it' (NA PREM 19/484, 57).

Race Today's response to the insurrection was twofold. First, it was instrumental in helping to set up the Brixton Defence Committee (BDC) which campaigned for an amnesty for all those arrested during the uprising. As the radical barrister and fellow BDC member Rudi Narayan would make clear in his cross-examination of witnesses during the Scarman Inquiry, such a demand came not as a plea for clemency but rather from the conviction that a revolt was inevitable given such widespread police abuse, that sooner or later people were going to rise up in self-defence against an illegal police operation involving the unlawful stop and search of thousands of innocent people (Narayan 1985: 143). Secondly, and uniquely, *Race Today* members utilized their close ties within the community to assemble the leaders of the uprising and debriefed them in extensive detail on their activities. Howe later revealed that 'the information was taped and transcribed, and after the contents were digested, both the tapes and the transcripts were destroyed'. Among the plethora of left-wing groups active in Brixton at the time, only *Race Today* was sufficiently rooted in the area to have been trusted in this role: Howe played cricket alongside and against local youth for Railton Road Cricket Club; Johnson had grown up and gone to school in Brixton and had many friends in the area; Ben's mum cooked and cleaned for C. L. R. James, who was by that point living in the flat above the *Race Today* offices and would debrief all he met about their lives and families. Through James, Howe had got to know Viv Richards, who regularly made a point of visiting Howe and James in Brixton when he was playing cricket in England; such visits by the world's leading batsman drew adulation from a community who correctly saw it as Richards showing his commitment to them. So over time, and in a multitude of ways, *Race Today* had, in Howe's words, 'become woven into the life of the community' (Howe 2011g).

In November 1981, *The Times* rang the *Race Today* offices to commission a 1,500-word article from Howe on his response to the Scarman Report. His feature article, the first he had written for mainstream British press, was published on 26 November 1981. Drawing on the material acquired from the leaders of the Brixton revolt to help inform his perspective, Howe rejected the plaudits Scarman had received from the liberal press for his report. While Scarman had resisted right-wing demands to recommend the granting of even greater police powers, he failed to 'grasp the nettle' by addressing the systemic abuses which had led to the revolt. Next to Scarman's continued support for 'stop and search', his failure to recommend safeguards against physical abuse and forced confessions of detainees or greater scrutiny of the police evidence used by magistrates to convict black people, his call for a more independent police complaint's system was 'mere tinkering'. Ignoring a wealth of personal testimony of widespread police racism towards black people, Scarman preferred police accounts which explained such racism in terms of a few inexperienced junior officers. He considered the image of a hostile police force held by black people, young and old alike, to be 'a myth' (1981: 106).

Entitled 'My Fears after this Failure', Howe's article highlighted the three central features to emerge from the revolts upon which any report should have rested. First was the fact that within 10 minutes of the uprising, a body of about 30 young men had gathered and had begun to transform a spontaneous reaction into an organized revolt. They had supervised the mounting of barricades and the manufacture of petrol bombs. They had organized scouts who moved around on skates and bicycles to gather information on enemy positions. They had set in train diversionary tactics to confuse the enemy. They had selected which buildings were to be destroyed by fire and saw to it they were. They had organized points at which the injured could be attended to and finally, it was they who gave the order to retreat which the mass of black people promptly obeyed. Such a body of men and women existed within every black community and had been evident in the dozens of other revolts in towns and cities across the county. The second crucial feature to have emerged was a profound transformation in the attitudes of older traditionally more conservative West Indian parents, who had offered sympathy and support to young black people when they had risen up. Thirdly, the much-touted 'white backlash' which had stopped the black community from taking drastic action in the past against their condition had not come and there appeared little possibility that it ever would. Rather, Howe noted, something else has happened. 'Young whites had joined the revolt' (Howe 1988: 67).

It was against this transformed social landscape that Howe predicted that the government's failure to tackle the root cause of the revolt in any fundamental way had ensured that they would necessarily reoccur on an even greater scale in the future.

Looking back 30 years later, Howe is clear about the significance of the People's Day of Action and the 1981 insurrection:

The Day of Action was the first organised mass intervention with a semblance of the March on Washington and the huge mobilisations in the Caribbean that I had been involved in. The thinking in *Race Today* was we could replicate it and we did. It represented an end to the easy going way and resignation to our lot, to the belief that things were bad but that we couldn't do anything about it. When the insurrection occurred it fundamentally broke with the past which had consisted of complaining quietly about our lot and whispering in the ear of white power. People acted in a massive spontaneous way and said "if you continue to treat us as you have been doing we will burn down every city".

(Howe 2011g)

Notes

- 1 Howe's articles were later published as an anthology in 1989 entitled *Bobby to Babylon*.
- 2 Gilroy notes that *Rock Against Racism* put on 200 events in just over a year after its formation in 1976; (1987); see also Duncambe and Trambly (2011).