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Cause for Concern

In the summer of 1968, a documentary was broadcast by the BBC series *Cause For Concern* that, in Howe's words, turned out to be a 'major watershed in the struggle in which the police and black community were locked' (Howe 1988: 29). The programme would set out in detail a number of shocking cases of police brutality and corruption against members of the black community and then invite senior officers within Metropolitan police (the Met) to respond to the charge that the police were racist.

The BBC's proposal to broach this subject in the mainstream media for the first time unleashed a storm of controversy, and prompted a campaign of threats and recriminations from the Met designed to stop the programme from being screened. The documentary was the brainchild of BBC producer Richard Taylor. In early 1968, he approached Selma James, C. L. R. James' wife and a gifted writer, organizer and activist, to ask her for names of people who could appear in a film exploring the issue of police racism. James was well connected and well regarded at the BBC, where she worked as an audio typist. When James heard what Taylor was proposing, she said that she did not believe he would ever get the documentary aired but agreed to help him try however she could.

Selma James suggested names of black victims of police brutality whose cases she was familiar with from her activist work as a member of the Black Regional Action Movement. As the first organizing secretary of Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) elected in 1965, James also recommended fellow member and radical barrister Ian Macdonald as someone who could participate in a live studio discussion about how police frequently abused their powers when dealing with members of the black community (James 2011). Finally, James suggested several grass-roots activists involved in campaigns against police racism such as Darcus Howe and Fennis Augustine. Augustine was a Grenadian trade union shop steward and an activist within the West Indian

Standing Conference who would later go on to become the High Commissioner for Grenada under Maurice Bishop's revolutionary government.

Thus, in July 1968, Howe was invited by *Cause for Concern* to participate in a live panel discussion involving black political activists and campaigners alongside senior officers of the Metropolitan Police over allegations that the police were racist. Entitled 'Equal before the Law?', the episode explored issues raised in a documentary to be screened before the live discussion (*Radio Times*, 26 July 1968). The film detailed several cases of the police racism, including instances of brutality, arrests on trumped-up charges and the fabrication of evidence to secure criminal convictions. It showed how in one case, officers from the Met planted car keys on a black schoolteacher and his friend, a barrister, and had charged them with stealing a police car. They were eventually acquitted and the Met was ordered to pay £8,000 in compensation. Black victims of police brutality spoke of how racial abuse preceded beatings while in custody. The documentary ended with an interview with an ex-police officer who spoke of how 'colour prejudice' was 'virtually absolute . . . it extends to probably 99%' (Howe 1988: 28).

In its listing for the programme on 26 July 1968, the *Radio Times* had posed the question: 'Is the black man particularly vulnerable when he comes up against the law?'. After describing the 'hardman cult' which existed among the lower ranks, requiring the young police recruit to prove himself by the number of arrests he made, the former officer was asked this same question by the presenter. His response was damning:

The old tradition would be that the coloured man is not as fully aware of his rights as a white man would be and on this assumption I suppose he would be more vulnerable.

(Ibid., 29)

Howe realized the significance of the documentary the moment he saw it. Up until that point, 'a conspiracy of silence' encompassed mainstream media, politicians and white liberals. Even multiracial lobby groups had kept the issue of police harassment and racial persecution from public view, 'thereby reinforcing the untrammelled power exercised by the police over the black community' (Ibid., 29). The bold and unambiguous content of the programme was bound to alter the balance of opinion. At the very least it would upset the complacency of white viewers and force them to take a position.

Just as far-reaching was the effect that the programme would have on black organizations. Howe knew that many multiracial and black lobby groups would

be profoundly shaken by its revelations. CARD, which in 1967 had prompted disaffiliation by its more militant members by agreeing to partner the new statutory body, National Council for Commonwealth Immigrants (NCCI), together with a host of smaller black support and welfare groups, had a strategy of quietly trying to persuade a liberal section of the British ruling class to ameliorate the worst conditions suffered by the black community (Ibid., 27; Sivanandan 1982: 17). As Howe later explained, this approach had the effect of rendering black people 'as helpless victims whom the liberals, with black middle-class aspirants alongside them, would assist in adjusting to the discipline and control of capitalist institutions' (Howe 1988: 27). These forces reacted with alarm to the Black Power Movement and its calls for direct action and therefore wished to avoid at all costs any high-profile public discussion of police racism, which would inevitably unleash the anger of the black working class.

The programme could not have come at a worse time for the Met. In May 1968, they had fiercely resisted the Home Secretary James Callaghan's proposal to add a clause to the Police Code, making it an offence to discriminate against black immigrants; the Police Federation declared it 'a gross insult even to suggest it', alleging that its purpose was to 'placate the misplaced fears of some immigrant bodies that they may not get fair treatment' (Wild 2008: 199).

When senior officers from the Met were invited to an advance screening of the documentary, they were incandescent with rage. The late Sir Robert Mark, then assistant commissioner for the Met, puts the following gloss on the police reaction to the documentary in his memoirs:

Representatives of the Met were only allowed to see the film after its completion. They were horrified. The Commissioner objected to its viewing and the BBC got cold feet. Then of course the civil libertarian press began to rage about censorship and to make matters worse the commissioner gave a brief interview to ITV. The BBC therefore decided to go ahead.

(Mark 1978: 100)

As Howe has since pointed out, Mark's account conceals more than it reveals. The Commissioner did not merely object; he authorized his senior officers to deploy a series of increasingly desperate tactics to stop the programme from reaching public view. Senior officers at Scotland Yard threatened to withdraw future co-operation with BBC journalists if the film was shown, and lawyers acting for the Metropolitan Police sent letters the BBC reserving their right to

seek a High Court injunction to stop the programme from being aired. Initially, the pressure was effective and BBC management bowed to police pressure, dropping the film from the schedule.

That would have been the end of the affair if Richard Taylor had not telephoned Selma James. As James recalls it, the conversation began with Taylor's acknowledgement, 'you were right, they are not letting it on the air, but don't tell anyone' (James 2011). After receiving the call, James telephoned another producer she knew at the BBC and told him what had happened. He told her to leak the story to the 'Inside Pages' of the *Daily Mirror*. The paper would, he opined, be very interested in the story and would still print it even if she did not provide her name. James followed his advice, and as predicted, the story was front-page news in the *Mirror* and then in every other newspaper thereafter (James 2011).

In addition to the public outcry and scorn of the press and civil liberties groups that followed these revelations of the BBC's acquiescence to police bullying, James, Howe, Fennis Augustine and others organized a daily picket of the BBC Broadcasting House. Howe attended along with his wife Una and daughter Tamara, who in adulthood has followed her father into a career in broadcasting and is now chief operating officer at the children's programmes wing of the BBC. 'I like to remind her that her first experience of the BBC was when she picketed it as a child,' Howe remarks (Howe 2011b).

Entitled *Cause For Alarm*, the daily picket by up to 20 black activists and their supporters became a focal point for the press in their coverage of the campaign against police attempts to censor the BBC's output. As public criticism of the BBC built to a crescendo and threatened to do permanent reputational damage to the BBC, the Corporation bowed to public pressure and rescheduled the programme and the live studio discussion that was to follow it.

The police appear to have made one last bid to have the programme pulled by the BBC. On the day before it was aired, they arrested Black Panther leader Obi Egbuna on a charge of writing threats to kill police officers at Hyde Park (Bunce and Field 2011). The timing of the arrest and the decision to charge him with such a heinous crime seemed designed to disrupt the fledgling Black Power Movement and put pressure on the BBC to withdraw the programme. Appearing on ITV, the Commissioner contended that the police were now faced with a militant fanaticism and that showing the programme may violate the *sub judice* rule. This last-ditch effort to suppress the programme by reference to an unrelated arrest only served to compound the public impression that the police had something to hide.

With the programme returning to the BBC's schedule, police tactics changed. Assistant Commissioner Robert Mark was given the task of representing the police in the live discussion following the documentary. In his memoirs, Mark describes the documentary as 'one of the most inaccurate and distorted films ever to find its way on to a BBC screen' (Mark 1978: 100). His only evidence of any inaccuracy related to a white building worker who appeared in the first minutes of the film and whose case had been included, no doubt, to show that the white working class were also victims of police malpractice. Mark complained that the BBC had failed to mention his previous convictions for carrying offensive weapons or that a policeman had received £100 in compensation for criminal injuries arising from his last arrest.

Mark managed to track down the officer who had been injured during the white builder's arrest and turned up at the BBC studio determined to present him as a witness for examination and cross-examination during the live discussion. Howe and the other civilian witnesses who were waiting in a hospitality room to go on air were told by a nervous BBC technician that the police were insisting on introducing the new witness. When they protested that this would exhaust the time allotted for the discussion of police racism, they were told by the BBC that Mark and the police had threatened to withdraw from the programme if they were not permitted to call their witness. The police tactics were bold. By ensuring that the live discussion was taken up with the one detail of the programme which did not concern police racism, they would seek to undermine the credibility of the documentary in the public mind without permitting any discussion of the film's substantive allegations levelled at the police.

Howe, Macdonald and the others quickly devised a strategy. They told the technician that they were there to discuss matters concerning black people and that the issue of the white worker was peripheral to this; nonetheless, they were prepared to go on air. Howe describes the strategy that they had agreed upon in the hospitality room:

Neither the BBC nor the police were told what our trump card would be. We decided to continue the struggle to have the witness removed in full view of the millions who had tuned into the programme. We would expose the history of police attempts to have the film banned and their latest manoeuvre would be explained in that context. Should they persist with their demand, we would walk out of the studio at a prearranged signal.

(Howe 1988: 33)

When the studio discussion went on air and the police persisted in their demand to call their witness, Howe gave the prearranged signal and began to lead the walkout. Conscious of how this was playing out to the watching millions, Reg Gale of the Police Federation relented and the police agreed to engage in a proper discussion of the film's contents.

Selma James watched the programme with Ian Macdonald's family and described the moment when Darcus got up and proposed to leave as 'extraordinary. . . . What was so fantastic is that it was utterly uncompromising and for a good cause.' Howe remembers the moment as 'electric' and says that he was working from instinct and in a way that expressed his political attitude (James 2011).

Having defeated police attempts to railroad the discussion, point after point went in favour of the civilian participants and against the police. Mark's attempts to argue that the cases highlighted within the film were as a result of a few rotten apples, which any institution was bound to contain and against which the black community was protected by the complaints system, were powerfully challenged and refuted by the black participants. Police brutality and harassment, they claimed, was not isolated and fragmented but rampant and pervasive. What was more, the complaints system, with police investigating police, was a sham in which black victims had no hope of redress. One memorable moment occurred when a young black activist from Notting Hill concluded his contribution by stating, 'The police must stop framing and brutalising blacks or the black community will organise to stop them' (Howe 1988: 33). Amid his sweeping attacks on the BBC for making the documentary and 'the mixed bag of the opposition' the police faced, Mark's memoirs say little about the substantive debate other than conceding that he 'didn't think anybody won' and that his reception at Scotland Yard after the programme was 'mixed' (Mark 1978: 102).

The fact that the programme was shown at all was a breakthrough for the black community. Howe describes the tremendous strength and boost in confidence that the documentary gave to activists, in that it showed that the police armour could be penetrated through direct action and a determined campaign. Following the documentary, the popular Left journal *Black Dwarf* reprinted the entire transcript of the programme, thereby enabling those engaged in the struggle against police racism to reach out to wider sections of the Left.

For Howe himself, the lessons were no less profound. His tactical intervention had outflanked the Assistant Commissioner and Metropolitan Police in front of

a live audience of millions. A struggle begun on the pavement outside the BBC Studios had been taken on to the live programme and had exposed the police's underhand attempts to first ban the film and then curtail the live discussion of its contents. These were to prove valuable lessons, which Howe would not forget when he was conducting his own defence in the Mangrove trial 3 years later. Howe's dignified challenge to the proceedings during the debate had produced an extraordinary moment of dramatic and compelling television. In this sense, *Cause for Concern* gave him his first experience of the political power of television, an experience that would inform his career with Channel 4 decades later.