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Demonstration

The Mangrove Demonstration sent shockwaves through the British polity. Black Power, which had been such a potent political force in the United States and the Caribbean, was finally flexing its muscles in Britain. The press were horrified, ministers demanded immediate briefings and the Metropolitan Police, determined to stamp out black radicalism, took it as a cue to launch a series of raids on the leaders responsible for the protest. Howe was at the centre of the storm.

August 9

The demonstration took place on the second Sunday in August. Protesters started arriving outside the Mangrove at 2 p.m., and by 3 p.m., there were about 150 demonstrators ready to march. It was a fine day; Howe recalls '[e]ven the unpredictable British weather would come out in support of Black Power' (Howe 1980: 38). The American campaigner Angela Davis has talked of the joy that accompanies political struggle and this was apparent in Howe's speech, which kicked off the march. Talking from a makeshift platform, he addressed the crowd with a mixture of determination and humour:

It has been for some time now that black people have been caught up in complaining to police about police; complaining to magistrates about magistrates; complaining to judges about judges; and complaining to politicians about politicians. We have become the own shapers of our destiny as from today. The precedent has been set, young kids have committed the most aggressive revolutionary action that has been known in this country for some time. They walked into a police station and took it over, but the objective must be clear.¹ The objective was to free their brothers. What our objective is today, and what it's going to continue to be is a concerted, determined attempt to prevent any infringement of our rights.

(Rosso 1973)

The irony was not lost on his audience, who cheered and laughed as Howe lampooned the authorities and the black leaders who had sought redress through official channels. Photographs show Howe smiling as he talked, clearly in his element. Next to speak was Althea Jones-LeCointe, the driving force behind the British Black Panthers. Speeches over, the marchers, accompanied by 200 police officers, then set off from All Saint's Road, heading west along Lancaster Road to Notting Dale police station, the first of three stations that they were due to visit as part of the protest.

The demonstration was remarkable for several reasons. The casual observer could be forgiven for mistaking it for an American campaign. Some marchers were clearly channelling Black Panther style, wearing black berets, dark glasses and leather jackets. The banners too reflected the rhetoric that had emerged in America, featuring slogans such as 'CALLING ALL PIGS, CALLING ALL PIGS, FREAK OUT OR GET OUT', 'BLACK POWERS GONNA GET YOUR MAMA' and 'POWER TO THE PEOPLE' (NA CRIM 1 5522/1). The police presence was massive. At the beginning of the march, there were more police than demonstrators and the number of officers increased at regular intervals during the march. Under cross-examination, Inspector Aldritt, a senior officer who was present at the march, later admitted that '500 police officers were available that afternoon' (*TO*, 5 November 1971). Files held by the National Archives show that Aldritt significantly underestimated the extent of the police presence. A document dated 6 August and issued by Deputy Assistant Commissioner J. H. Gerrard shows that 588 constables, 84 sergeants, 29 inspectors and four chief inspectors were available during the march. In sum, 705 police officers were present, and this figure does not include the handful of CID and Special Branch officers who were detailed to follow the demonstration (NA MEPO 31/20).

The Action Committee for Defence of the Mangrove and the Black Panthers

The demonstration was organized by the Action Committee for Defence of the Mangrove in conjunction with the Black Panther Movement. According to evidence that emerged at the trial, the details of the march were thrashed out by a small group who met in July at the Willesden home of activist Selma James. The meeting's composition reflected the broad-based community campaign the Action Committee sought to galvanize in defence of Crichtlow's restaurant. Along with US-born Jewish radical James, other committee members included Rene

Webb of the community group Advise and barrister Tony Mohipp, secretary of the North Kensington-based Universal Black Improvement Organisation (TO, 24 January 1971; KP, 26 November 1971). As a result of the meeting, Mohipp wrote an open letter to the Home Office, Prime Minister Edward Heath, Harold Wilson, the leader of the Opposition, and the High Commissioners for Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana and Barbados to announce the march and set out the community's grievances. Howe would later remark that this approach was Black Power, but 'tinged with a little British constitutionality' (Howe 1980: 38). Mohipp's letter, which is preserved in the National Archives, reads thus:

We, the black people of London have called this demonstration in protest against constant police harassment which is being carried out against us, and which is condoned by the legal system.

In particular, we are calling for an end to the persecution of the Mangrove Restaurant of 8 All Saint's Road, W.11., a restaurant that serves the Black Community.

These deliberate raids, harassments and provocations have been reported to the Home Office on many occasions. So too has the mounting list of grievances such as radis [sic] on West Indian parties, Wedding Receptions, and other places where Black People lawfully gather.

We feel this protest is necessary as all other methods have failed to bring about any change in the manner police have chosen to deal with Black People.

We shall continue to protest until Black People are treated with justice by the Police and the Law Courts.

(NA HO 325/143)

A flyer was also produced advertising the march to Notting Hill locals.

THE POLICE HAVE DONE IT AGAIN!!!
 THEY ARE SAYING CLOSE THE MANGROVE RESTAURANT,
 A RESTAURANT
 SERVING BLACK PEOPLE IN LADBROKE GROVE.
 WHY?
 WHERE'S NEXT?
 THE METRO YOUTH CLUB?
 EVERYWHERE THAT BLACK PEOPLE GET TOGETHER!!!
 DEMONSTRATE
 IN SUPPORT OF OUR COMMUNITY (THE GROVE)
 on SUNDAY 9th AUGUST 1970
 at 2.30pm

(GPI JLR 3/1/5)

Notting Dale police station

After about an hour, the marchers reached Notting Dale police station on Sirdar Road. Again, Howe addressed the crowd, this time in earshot of the police station, which was surrounded by uniformed officers. The marchers were already outnumbered by their police escort. In spite of this, reinforcements were called. From the statements of an officer given during the trial, it seems that Notting Dale was overcome by a siege mentality. The marchers intended no violence. However, police witnesses argued that they interpreted chanting from the crowd as the prelude to attacks on officers. The marchers spotted an Austin Cambridge on Sirdar Road, the car of PC Frank Pulley and began to chant 'we want Puller, we want Puller'. Pulley was well known in the Grove, and according to some newspaper reports reviled by the local black community. The *Sunday Mirror* reported that his nickname 'Puller' referred to his habit of allegedly 'pulling' local black people into the police station and planting evidence on them or beating them (23 August 1970). Pulley denied these allegations and was never charged with any wrongdoing. At trial, police witnesses claimed that they had interpreted the chant as a threat to Pulley's safety and called in more officers. However, the transcript of radio traffic shows that the re-enforcements were called for when the marchers were still on Lancaster Road, a little more than 10 minutes away from the station, before the chant broke out.

Police anxieties may have been heightened by an incident that took place at Caledonian Road police station on 27 July, less than 2 weeks prior to the march. Howe had referred to the incident in his speech, describing it as 'aggressive revolutionary action', and its proximity to the march ensured both sides were still mindful of the event. Following the arrest of four young black men at Finsbury Park Summer Fair, a group of around 20 of their peers arrived at the police station protesting their innocence and demanding their release. The police viewed the protest as an attack and called for reinforcements who, upon their arrival, arrested everyone on the premises. Activist and *Guardian* journalist Vince Hines had been sent to cover the arrests, and he recalls the events thus:

The police seemed to have been panicked, by the presence of a large number of Black youth making demands, and more youth were arriving. They packed in the station, including the reception. Urgent police reinforcements were called for. Many police rushed to the station, cars and vans. I heard them arriving and stopping at a screech outside. A large number of police arrived, sirens blaring. Without asking questions, the arriving police arrested all they could. This approach infuriated the

youth. Black youth and police did not mix. A fight broke out between the police and the youth inside and outside the station.

(Hines 2010)

Howe took the event as a sign of a new assertive and radical spirit among the black youth of the Grove. The police, needless to say, saw it differently. Nerves were steadier at the Notting Hill station. The marchers reached the station just after 3:40. Police radio simply described the march as '[w]ell contained by police' (NA MEPO 31/20).

The battle of Portnall Road

The flashpoint came on Portnall Road on the way to Harrow Road station. The demonstrators left the Notting Hill station, turned up Ladbroke Grove and crossed the canal. From this point on, the police reports were becoming increasingly twitchy. At 3.59 p.m. a constable informed his controllers that the demonstration would end imminently. Between 4:02 p.m. and 4:17 p.m., there were six more messages trying to clarify where the march was headed next; 10 minutes later, the number plates of three allegedly suspicious vehicles were radioed in; at 4:33 p.m., the same constable reported that the marchers were heading '[a]long Coomaisie [sic] Road – a predominately coloured persons dwelling area'. Reading between the lines, it seems that the police feared that the march would grow in number as it went through the largely black area (Ibid.). On Portnall Road, the previously peaceful demonstration became a violent confrontation. Here the police were no thin blue line: rows of officers five deep formed a human barricade at the intersection of Portnall and Marban Road. It was later asserted that this provocative move was an attempt to allow traffic to move. In any case, within minutes of the stoppage, violence erupted, engulfing the march. A police radio signal went out: 'Urgent Assistance required – Shirland Road – all points north – serious fighting – ambulances required' (Ibid.). For a quarter of an hour, chaos reigned:

The demonstration literally exploded. The violence was ferocious, as the combatants continued, for fifteen minutes, to batter, to wound and to maim each other. The police were moved to an orgy of violence and abuse. It was a street fight. Not one single officer entertained that much touted skill of crowd control. It was pure, unadulterated, unlicensed brutality. The niggers were to be beaten into the ground. How dare we, they seemed to be saying, take to the streets in opposition

to them? We did not qualify. Anyone but a “bunch of niggers”. Crude though the language may be, the words fittingly described the reaction of the British state on that day.

We gave as good as we got. Bricks, stones, bottles, any ammunition at hand we threw at the police. Whole building skips were emptied at them.

(Howe 1980: 38)

In the aftermath, arrests were made and the crowd dispersed. Howe escaped, beating a retreat to the Mangrove to meet his wife and child. According to the police, the violence was premeditated, and the march an elaborate ambush. This account provided the authorities with a narrative that branded black radicalism criminal, as well as giving them a pretext for arresting the radical leadership that had coalesced around the Mangrove.

Howe's arrest came later that evening. The police received word that the leaders of the march were meeting at the Mangrove and arrived there around 6:20 p.m. to make arrests. Sam Morris of the Community Relations Commission described the arrests in a report submitted to the Home Secretary a week after the march. Morris reported that ‘several van loads’ of police arrived at the Mangrove, cordoned off the area and then stormed the restaurant, laying into the customers, ‘who ducked, dived, jumped through windows and took every step possible in self protection’ (NA HO 325/143). It was during this attack, which had all the hallmarks of a reprisal, that Howe was arrested, outside the Mangrove. In court later in the year, he described the beating he received, stating that he did not respond in kind. Fearing for the safety of his wife and child inside the restaurant, he did not defend himself, as he had no intention of giving the officers any excuse for hurting his family. The 19 who had been arrested would appear at Marylebone Magistrates Court the next day.

Note

- 1 Howe's reference to ‘aggressive revolutionary action’ concerns an incident in the Caledonian Road station in July 1970 and is discussed below.