



FASCISM & THE FAR RIGHT SERIES

NEVER AGAIN

Rock Against Racism and the
Anti-Nazi League 1976–1982

David Renton

ROUTLEDGE



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A Hundred Years of Anti-Fascism*



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NEVER AGAIN

By 1976, the National Front had become the fourth largest party in Britain. In a context of national decline, racism and fears that the country was collapsing into social unrest, the Front won 19 per cent of the vote in elections in Leicester and 100,000 votes in London.

In response, an anti-fascist campaign was born, which combined mass action to deprive the Front of public platforms with a mass cultural movement. Rock Against Racism brought punk and reggae bands together as a weapon against the right.

At Lewisham in August 1977, fighting between the far right and its opponents saw two hundred people arrested and fifty policemen injured. The press urged the state to ban two rival sets of dangerous extremists. But as the papers took sides, so did many others who determined to oppose the Front.

Through the Anti-Nazi League hundreds of thousands of people painted out racist graffiti, distributed leaflets and persuaded those around them to vote against the right. This combined movement was one of the biggest mass campaigns that Britain has ever seen.

This book tells the story of the National Front and the campaign which stopped it.

David Renton is a British barrister, historian and author. His previous books include *Fascism: Theory and Practice* (1999), *Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Britain in the 1940s* (2000), *This Rough Game: Fascism and Anti-Fascism* (2001), *British Fascism, the Labour Movement and the State* (2004, with Nigel Copsey) and *When We Touched the Sky: The Anti-Nazi League 1977–1981* (2006).

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Never Again

Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League 1976–1982

David Renton

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Anti-Nazi League 1976–1982

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The Carib Club got petrol bombed
The National Front was getting awful strong
They done in Dave and Dagenham Ron
In the winter of '79

When all the gay geezers got put inside
And coloured kids was getting crucified
A few fought back and a few folks died
In the winter of '79

Tom Robinson, *Winter of '79*

PREFACE

This book tells the story of the National Front (NF) and two of its opponents in 1970s Britain: Rock Against Racism (RAR) and the Anti-Nazi League (ANL). The Front was a rising electoral force, in competition with the Liberals to become Britain's third party. The Front secured 44,000 votes in local elections in Leicester in May 1976. In March 1977, the NF beat the Liberal Party in a by-election at Stechford in Birmingham. At Greater London Council elections in May 1977, the Front secured just under 120,000 votes, beating the Liberals in 33 out of the 91 seats which both parties contested. With a paid membership of 13,000 people in 1976–1977,¹ the party had around twenty times more supporters than the Ecology Party (the forerunner of today's Greens) and more than any of the Scottish, Welsh, or Northern Irish parties.

Indeed, the NF was more than an electoral machine. Part of its appeal came from its association with violence. The Front was feared by its political opponents and by the victims of racist attacks. To give just two examples: in July 1978, a report by the television programme *World in Action* claimed that the first six months of the year had seen twenty-three separate attacks by the Front on its opponents in Leeds alone. Bethnal Green and Stepney Trades Council documented a series of attacks by Front supporters in the East End over summer and autumn 1978, ranging from sending people in large groups to chant racist slogans outside local shops to attacks by Front supporters on black people in the street or in their homes. One Front fellow-traveller, 20-year-old Fred Challis, pleaded guilty to the murder of a white vagrant in the East End, in which he smashed the man's face in with a gas cylinder, after which he had used the blood to smear the slogan 'NF rules OK' on a nearby wall. At his sentencing hearing, Challis admitted that he had carried out over three hundred attacks altogether.²

The National Front was an early example of a kind of politics which has since become all too familiar, a group influenced by the anti-democratic politics of

fascism but standing for election to Parliament. By the time of this book's publication, it has become conventional to date the rise of such 'Euro-fascist' parties to events in Northern France in 1983,³ when the Front National's Jean-Pierre Stirbois won 16.7 per cent of the vote in local elections at Dreux in Normandy.⁴ Yet before the rise of the FN, it was the NF which seemed most likely to achieve a breakthrough. In 1973, Martin Webster won 16 per cent of the vote at a parliamentary by-election in West Bromwich. In July 1976, a council by-election in Deptford saw the National Front and the National Party (a smaller split-off from the NF) win a combined 44 per cent, more between them even than the winning Labour candidate. The opportunity which opened up for the far right in France was no greater than the chance available to its counterpart here.

This book integrates a narrative and document-based history of the 1970s with interviews with anti-fascists who campaigned against the Front. The result is not an autobiography; I was too young to play any part in the events this book describes. I was at primary school in west London when Margaret Thatcher gave her infamous St Francis of Assisi speech ('Where there is discord, may we bring harmony . . .'). I encountered the crisis of the 1970s only in brief moments. I heard it the day 'Jew' became a verb among my classmates, 'Jew him', 'Jew you'. I saw it in the inkwell beside which a pupil had carved a swastika. It was the cough the other boys made as they jeered a racist insult and the shame on our teacher's face as he fled from the room. There were other signs as well, possible resources of hope: the punks who gathered to be photographed outside the Chelsea Drug Store, the bass-scale and patter-rhythm of an Ian Dury song ('Sex & Drugs & Rock & Roll') blaring from a car radio, the graffiti I puzzled over as our school bus drove past the Westway, 'George Davis is Innocent', 'Justice for Blair Peach'. Summoning these memories is like watching fireworks; the colours flare, depart – and only the smell of gunpowder remains.

In 2007, I published a previous history of the anti-fascism of the 1970s;⁵ this new book is, however, very different from its predecessor. At the time when I began writing about fascists and anti-fascists, the major threat on the British right was the British National Party which could plausibly be understood as a mere imitator of the interwar parties of fascist Europe. I was content to describe the National Front as a fascist party and to pass lightly over the exact nature of the group, the changing composition of its leadership, or the rivalries which swirled around the Front's chairman John Tyndall. By the time of this book, the energy on the right belongs to Islamophobic groups which owe little if any loyalty to Mussolini or Hitler and disclaim even the core fascist ambition of purging the liberal state. Indeed, for all the confidence with which the Front's enemies characterised the Front as 'Nazis', there were times at which even the National Front (or at least its minority factions) behaved something like today's post-fascist parties. Re-considering this history ten years later, I have had no choice but to look with greater care at the Front and how it organised.

There are an increasing number of memoirs written by former members of the Front. Where they (or, for that matter, their opponents) tell the story of the

1970s as a series of military confrontations, each one ending in yet another glorious military victory, I have disregarded them. Where members of the Front have written their memoirs with insight, acknowledging their mistakes, I have treated their accounts with respect. The resulting narrative is intended to go further than any previous account in integrating the stories of fascism and anti-fascism, showing how the tactics of the right forced the left to adapt and the other way around.

While much of this book is devoted to Rock Against Racism and the Anti-Nazi League, I have sought to contextualise both campaigns. As well as the part which RAR played in the history of anti-fascism, it also occurred at a particular stage in the history of black Britain, just as the first mixed black-and-white generation of British youth reached adulthood. Consequently, there was a much greater opening for an integrated music scene than at any time in the previous twenty years. Any history of the 1970s must also acknowledge the mixture of possibility and threat posed to anti-racists by the rise of punk, which in turn requires an explanation of this cultural milieu and such dynamics as its relation to the memory of the Second World War, and the role played by old and new cultural media (the music press and the punk fanzines).

While in this book I do not limit my definition of anti-fascism to members of particular groups or people shaped by any ideology, still less a left-wing one, I do restrict the term to those who took action of some sort against the National Front. Anti-fascist activism took numerous forms, from leafleting voters to resisting a racist attack, from demonstrating in the streets to attending a concert.

The purpose of treating action as essential to the definition of anti-fascism is not to draw a line between politics and culture;⁶ the distinction is instead between activity and passivity, between the opposition of fascism's repeated adversaries and of its occasional critics. Perhaps as many as 50,000 people joined the Front at some point in the 1970s, only to leave the party later in the decade. Even if all of those who voted for that party at least once in any election, local or national, are added together the resulting calculation still restricts the group's support to no more than 1 or 2 per cent of the adult population. It would be meaningless to treat the other 98 per cent of the population as a single granite bloc of anti-fascists. Hundreds of thousands of people despised the Front, while similar numbers were sympathetic towards that party or its programme of repatriation. If the press was to be believed, when most people read about the clashes between the far left and the far right, they wanted the police to eviscerate both sets of unwelcome extremists. And yet, as the decade wore on, opinions changed and the Front was increasingly seen as the greater problem. This book investigates why the National Front fell in popular estimation.

The late 1970s and early 1980s provide innumerable examples of people from Thatcherites to (ex-)Trotskyists who at one time were doing all in their power to stop the Front and at other times were in some sort of alliance with it. On the right, it would be meaningless to describe the Monday Club as anti-fascist in 1972, when the Club welcomed Front supporters to its events and gave Front leaders platforms to address its local meetings. A case could however be made for

the Club's anti-fascism however a year later, when its leader Jonathan Guinness expelled all known National Front fellow-travellers from the Club's ranks. The book extends a similarly nuanced approach towards the Labour Party, anti-fascist when it instructed its local authorities to refuse the Front to book halls on their premises, yet less impressive when its MPs tailed the Front in advocating intensified immigration controls. Even the far left was not without its renegades, as future chapters show.

This book makes use of a number of previously unexplored primary sources, including the report of Commander John Cass of the Metropolitan Police into the death of Blair Peach, one of two anti-fascists killed by police officers during the period of this book. In 2010, when the Cass Report was first published, a number of journalists reported Cass's findings; in other words, the name of the officer whom Cass believed had killed Blair Peach. The first attempt to summarise *why* Cass had felt confident to identify a suspect appeared in a piece I wrote for the *London Review of Books* in 2014.⁷ This book's narrative of the events at Southall in 1979 builds on that account.

A further new source has been the archive of the anti-fascist magazine *Searchlight*, now deposited at Northampton University. It includes complete runs of the main right-wing magazines, local reports from activists who passed on to the magazine everything that took place in their town over a period of several years and even correspondence between individuals on the right. Thanks are due to the archivist Daniel Jones for his assistance in accessing those papers. I am also grateful to the archivists at the National Archives and the Bishopsgate Institute for their help.

Over the past ten years, further accounts have appeared which, like this one, have been based on interviews with surviving anti-fascists. They include Daniel Rachel's compendious oral history of Rock Against Racism, *Walls Come Tumbling Down*.⁸ Veterans of the same campaign have published *Reminiscences of RAR*.⁹ Sean Birchall's *Beating the Fascists* is based on interviews with a generation of anti-fascists (the 'squaddists'), who were expelled from the SWP in 1981, formed their own party Red Action and later set up the UK's next major anti-far right alliance, Anti-Fascist Action.¹⁰ The new edition of Nigel Copsey's *Anti-Fascism in Britain* contains valuable new material on the 1970s, as does his and Matthew Worley's collection of essays on the contemporary far right *Tomorrow Belongs to Us*.¹¹ Another AFA veteran Dave Hann, in his book *Physical Resistance*,¹² tells the story of the past hundred years' struggles between left and right from a physical force perspective. Hann's is a generous account, capable of giving credit to those whose behaviour he judged at other times reprehensible. I have attempted to emulate his non-sectarian spirit here and produce an account which should be broadly recognisable to all those who took part even if they might interpret any particular incident differently from me.

Some 80 anti-fascists were interviewed for my earlier book, *When We Touched the Sky*, and I have conducted a dozen further interviews for this new account. Previously, I published my interviewees' first names only; that caution is however no longer appropriate now that the majority of them are identifiable from other published sources.

I have discussed the ideas in this book with friends, including Jon Anderson, Anindya Bhattacharyya, Juliet Ash, Nigel Copsey, Colin Fancy, Craig Fowlie, Ruth Gregory, Arun Kundnani, Graham Macklin, Gary McNally, Louise Purbrick and Lucy Robinson. I am grateful to Syd Shelton for permission to use the cover image, to Tom Robinson, for allowing me to quote from ‘Winter of ’79’, and to Craig Fowlie and Rebecca McPhee at Routledge and Jeanne Brady at Cove Publishing Support Services. Thanks are also owed to those who have loaned me documents from the period, including Annie Nehmad and Evan Smith, to Mitch Mitchell who gave me his collection of fascist and anti-fascist newspapers cuttings, and to Lucy Whitman (aka Lucy Toothpaste) who granted me access to her archive, including materials from Rock Against Racism and Rock Against Sexism and copies of her pioneering punk fanzine, *JOLT*.

My greatest debt I owe, as ever, to Anne, to Sam and to Ben.

Notes

- 1 N. Fielding, *The National Front* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 55, 180.
- 2 Bethnal Green and Stepney Green Trades Council, *Blood on the Streets* (London: Bethnal Green and Stepney Green Trades Council, 1978), p. 41.
- 3 C. Mudde, ‘Europe’s centre-right is on the wrong track with “good populism”’, *Guardian*, 30 October 2017.
- 4 J. Rydgren, *Political Protest and Ethno-Nationalist Mobilization: The Case of the French Front National* (Stockholm: Stockholm University, 2002), pp. 288–290; J. Marcus, *The National Front and French Politics: The Resistible Rise of Jean-Marie Le Pen* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), pp. 9–10.
- 5 D. Renton, *When We Touched the Sky: The Anti-Nazi League 1977–1981* (Cheltenham: New Clarion Press, 2007).
- 6 For a different perspective, giving greater credit to the ‘passive’ anti-fascists of precious decades, N. Copsey and A. Olechnowicz (eds), *Varieties of Anti-Fascism: Britain in the Inter-War Period* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
- 7 D. Renton, ‘The killing of Blair Peach’, *London Review of Books*, 22 May 2014.
- 8 D. Rachel, *Walls Come Tumbling Down: The Music and Politics of Rock Against Racism, 2 Tone and Red Wedge* (London: Picador, 2016).
- 9 R. Huddle and R. Saunders (eds), *Reminiscences of RAR* (London: Redwords, 2016).
- 10 S. Birchall, *Beating the Fascists: The Untold Story of Anti-Fascist Action* (London: Freedom Press, 2010).
- 11 N. Copsey, *Anti-Fascism in Britain* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), p. 1; N. Copsey and M. Worley (eds), *‘Tomorrow Belongs to Us’: The British Far Right since 1967* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).
- 12 D. Hann, *Physical Resistance: A Hundred Years of Anti-Fascism* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2013).



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IN ENGLAND, DREAMING

Any adequate explanation of the National Front between its launch in 1967 and its late 1970s high point must start with the history of Britain since the Second World War. In common with other parties of the extreme right, the National Front preached a message of national decline and reinvigoration saying that Britain was in crisis and could recover only under the Front's leadership. Of necessity, such a message could have had little resonance in the Britain of 1918, which was still one of the world's two principal industrial and military powers. The politics of national renewal could hardly have been compelling in the aftermath of the Allied victory in the Second World War, when Britain was chosen as one of five permanent members of the United National Security Council, nor in the early 1950s when one-fifth of the world's exported goods were still manufactured in the UK and the economy remained a leading force in the emergent technologies of electronics, computers and aerospace. Two decades later, however, Britain was in the words of the historian Robert Colls, 'No longer a world military power, no longer an imperial power, no longer a manufacturing power'.¹

The absence of empire and the memory of war

There was no clearer sign of the country's decline than the loss of her colonies. In 1945, the British Empire included most of the Caribbean, all of the Indian subcontinent, much of the Middle East and a third of Africa. By 1976–1977, little was left other than Northern Ireland, the Falkland Islands and the dubious boon of Rhodesia, whose unilateral declaration of independence in 1965 continued to haunt British politicians (and inspire the Front) a decade later. Through the 1970s, the British suffered repeated reminders that they were a diminished force. Edward Heath's 1970–1974 Tory government announced five national emergencies. Such was the crisis in the private sector that in 1971 even the luxury car

2 In England, dreaming

manufacturer Rolls Royce was declared bankrupt and had to be nationalised. In winter 1973–1974, in response to a combination of miners' strikes and oil shortages following the war between Israel and Egypt and with interest rates standing at a punitive 13 per cent, the government introduced a three-day working week. In winter 1976–1977, Chancellor of the Exchequer Denis Healey, who had once promised to 'squeeze property speculators until the pips squeak', applied to the IMF for the largest loan the Fund had ever granted.

The reason that Britain agreed to concede her empire was that a generation of British politicians were well aware that the UK had neither the military capability nor the economic resources to fight colonial wars on multiple fronts. On occasion, Britain did fight independence movements with murderous consequences, notably in Malaya (1947–1960) and Kenya (1952–1960). But from the perspective of Britain's ambitions to remain a colonial power the more significant conflict came at Suez in 1956 when Israel, the UK and France invaded Egypt to take control of the Suez Canal and remove Colonel Nasser from power. Egypt succeeded in closing the Canal and, Britain and France had no choice but to withdraw, after pressure was applied by the US. Prime Minister Anthony Eden resigned and was replaced by Harold Macmillan whose subsequent 'Winds of Change' speech to the hostile members of the South African Parliament in February 1960 acknowledged the inevitability of African independence.

In the aftermath of the Suez Crisis, it had seemed possible that resistance to decolonisation might emerge within Parliament and one member of the Cabinet, Lord Salisbury, was touted as a challenger to Prime Minister Macmillan from the right. Salisbury was defeated, however, in 1957 and forced to resign.

The fact of empire gave opportunities to hundreds of thousands of British people. Merely by relocating abroad, a British civil servant would be charged with great power and find him- or herself making life or death decisions about others – where the subjects of empire were to be housed, whether at times of famine they were fed. In the words of George Orwell, writing at the end of the 1930s:

[T]he over-whelming bulk of the British proletariat does not live in Britain but in Asia and Africa. It is not in Hitler's power, for instance, to make a penny an hour a normal industrial wage; it is perfectly normal in India and we are at great pains to keep it so . . . It is quite common for an Indian coolie's leg to be thinner than the average Englishman's arm. And there is nothing racial in this, for well-fed members of the same races are of normal physique; it is due to simple starvation. This is the system which we all live on and which we denounce when there seems to be no danger of its being altered.²

In the 1970s, there were still tens of thousands of British people drawing down pensions earned in years spent as colonial administrators. Hundreds of thousands of others had migrated to Britain from her white colonies. Yet the status of all these people depended on Britain's past, not her future. On the fabric of Britain's

declining cities, meanwhile, the large, often deserted, buildings of the past contained countless subtle visual reminders of the country's imperial history.

In the context of British geopolitical decline, the Second World War took on retrospective importance as a symbol of the greatness the country had once enjoyed. Most politicians had served in the war. The Conservative chair Willie Whitelaw had been a major in a tank brigade. The shadow Home Secretary and advocate of austerity ('monetarist') economics Keith Joseph had been an artillery captain during the war. Prime Minister Edward Heath, notoriously awkward in office and seemingly incapable of expressing emotion, had watched the Nuremberg Trials as a young man and suffered as he realised the scale of the Nazi crimes. Even the pacifist Tony Benn had undergone military service as a young RAF pilot officer. The war was a constant presence on 1970s TV screens, in *Dad's Army*, *Are you Being Served?* and *Coronation Street*, where adversity would be answered with patriotic singsongs and bitter complaints about the younger generation who did not understand the sacrifices the old had made. For Alf Garnett, or for Rigsby in *Rising Damp*, the war was a better Britain to which the worse present day had constantly to be compared.

Yet as the decade went on, the optimism of the war films, the boys' comics and the television documentaries that had been ubiquitous for many years seemed to give way to a darker mood and even a fascination with the defeated enemy. This process of rediscovery was not limited to Britain. One theme of Peter Novick's classic account, *The Holocaust in American Life*, is that the collective memory of the Second World War in the United States was not at its most pressing in 1945 but grew as the 1960s and the 1970s went on, as the Eichmann trial raised awareness of the Holocaust and in response to Israel's 1967 and 1973 wars. For Novick, the moment when the Holocaust moved to the centre of American life was at the end of the 1970s, in a short period which saw the formation of the Simon Wiesenthal Center (1977), an attempted march through the Jewish district of Skokie by partisans of the National Socialist Party of America (also 1977) and the television series *Holocaust*, which was watched by nearly one hundred million Americans in 1978.³

A similar account of awareness of the Holocaust in British life would also see the 1970s as the crucial period. For in Britain, as in America, and for decades after the war ended, popular memory of its events downplayed the extent of civilian casualties, including Hitler's Jewish victims. As Tony Kushner has noted, there was 'a prolonged and complex process of understanding [the Holocaust] which is yet to be completed'. The story of the War, as told in Britain, was one of isolation and vindication. The UK was the plucky little nation who had stood alone. The Holocaust came into this narrative through Richard Dimbleby's broadcasts from Bergen-Belsen, showing emaciated but living survivors, rescued from death by heroic British soldiers. Even the name Auschwitz was little known in Britain until the 1970s, as the camp had been liberated by Soviet rather than British troops. Hitler's war against his own people was understood as a process of imprisonment in labour camps and death through overwork, rather than the cold-blooded extermination of millions.⁴

4 In England, dreaming

Slowly, a different story was emerging in which the crimes of the Holocaust were acknowledged. The Holocaust made its way into popular consciousness from the 1968 BBC documentary, *Warsaw Ghetto*, and through the success of Judith Kerr's children's novel, *When Hitler Stole Pink Rabbit*. As the decade wore on, fascism became an ever more present concern. Luchino Visconti's film *The Damned*, about a family of German industrialists who make peace with the Nazis, was first shown in the UK in winter 1969–1970. The subject of Frederick Forsyth's 1972 best-selling novel *The Odessa File* was a conspiracy of former Nazis travelling between Germany and Argentina. *Cabaret*, starring Liza Minnelli, was released in 1972 and *The Night Porter* in 1974, both films exploring the sexualised appeal of fascism. In John Gardner's 1975 novel, *The Werewolf Trace*, a conspiracy of former Nazis was hiding from capture in England. The following year, Ira Levin's *The Boys from Brazil* returned to the story of Hitler's survivors in South America. Rather than receding into the past, in popular culture the events of the War were becoming more prominent.

Ruining the government's plan

Britain, meanwhile, was poorer than she had been. By 1976, the UK's economy (measured in GDP per capita) had fallen behind not just the US, but Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden and Switzerland. The sense of decline was embodied in the rotting wallpaper in *Rising Damp*, in the Czech millionaire DeVere who acquires the stately home in *To the Manor Born*.

A recurring theme of National Front propaganda was that the people of Britain could be protected from hunger and bad housing only if black migrants were repatriated to their or their parents' home countries. The view that 'we' owed no obligation to 'them' was not a minority sentiment, it was the majority view among all generations save for the very young. The inferiority of foreigners was the common sense of the times, reinforced by every paper, every television show. It was the joke dragged out through four seasons of *Mind Your Language*, seven series of *Love Thy Neighbour* and more than fifty episodes of *Till Death Us Do Part*. At times, the idea that 'they' should not be 'here' was stated in violent language; at other times, its expression was agonising or guilty, with the point being made that of course Britain should be more welcoming – just not now, when the country was in such an awful mess. Here is Katherine Fussell, an 'ordinary housewife' writing to *The Times* in 1972:

[W]e hear of men in all walks of life offered redundancies in place of their work. White and black citizens of this country cannot buy or rent a home easily. Many young folk cannot get married because of the housing problems or if they do they live with in-laws and many marriages fail. Young school leavers, white and black are on the streets with nothing to think about or do . . . Let the government make it clear to these people from any country wanting to come to us, that the immigration quota remains.⁵

The 1972 miners' strike saw power cuts and the introduction of a three-day working week. The miners employed 'flying pickets', workers who rather than merely standing defensively outside their own pit visited adjoining workplaces to bring them out on strike as well. The use of this tactic reached its culmination at the Saltley Coke depot, just a mile outside Birmingham, where up to seven hundred vehicles gathered each day to collect fuel for local businesses. On 7 February 1972, some four hundred Barnsley miners picketed the depot. For four days, the miners sat in the road, blocked the outgoing trucks and wrestled with the police. The miners' leader Arthur Scargill called on Birmingham's engineers for support. That Thursday, the miners were joined by 10,000 supporters from the city chanting 'Close the gates'. Derrick Capper, Chief Constable of Birmingham Police, reluctantly agreed to their demand. Over the following eight days as the papers warned of the danger of blackouts, the government increased its pay offer to 27 per cent, which the jubilant miners accepted.

Events on this scale shaped the activists of the right and their audience. Eight days after Saltley Gate, the future runaway Lord Lucan walked into Hatchards bookshop. His marriage was at an end and he was sick of reading in the press that Britain was on the verge of civil war. He left the shop carrying two books, *Grey Wolf: An Intimate Study of a Dictator* and a copy of *Mein Kampf*.⁶

Edward Heath's government had moved to pre-empt a feared wave of strikes by introducing legislation enabling the courts to sequester the funds of unions which took part in unofficial strike action. His Industrial Relations Act was tested in summer 1972 when dockers protested against containerisation and job losses. The National Industrial Relations Court declared the picketing unlawful and five dockers, the 'Pentonville Five', were jailed. Workers on building sites and in Fleet Street struck in support of the Five. The TUC General Council belatedly voted to join the protests, promising a one-day general strike in support of the dockers. Before this could be held, the Official Solicitor found an excuse to apply for the jailed men's release.

Over the next two years, strikes by rail workers, engineers and others destroyed the remaining apparatus of the Industrial Relations Act.

In response, public figures canvassed the formation of private armies capable of taking over the factories and the power stations in the event of further strikes. Colonel David Stirling, founder of the Special Air Services (SAS), proposed the formation of a private volunteer army, 'GB75'.⁷ Junior minister Geoffrey Rippon noted that 'the foundations of our society are being shaken by violence and extremism', and proposed creating a Citizen's Voluntary Reserve.⁸

Part of the Tories' problem was that their leaders were trying to solve too many problems at once. As Prime Minister Heath saw it, he was fighting both inflation and unemployment. When he entered Downing Street in 1970, the number of people out of work had been a troubling 600,000. By November 1970, this had risen to 970,000. Such was the fear of unemployment passing the psychological barrier of one million that demonstrations were called in protest and 20,000 people marched to demand that the government take urgent action. In January 1972, the

one million threshold was crossed for the first time. The *Evening Standard's* front-page headline carried no words, just '1,023,583'. At Prime Minister's Questions, Labour MP Tom Swain threw the newspaper in disgust at Heath's dispatch box.

Terrified by the prospect of sustained mass unemployment, Edward Heath's government set out a programme of state spending but this in turn aggravated the shortfall between imports and exports. Between September 1972 and September 1973, the price of key manufacturing imports, including cotton, copper and zinc, all rose. This was before the oil shock of late 1973, when oil prices tripled and inflation rose to 16 per cent. Heath's struggle against unemployment provided, against his and his party's intentions, the ideal conditions for labour to flourish. Stable employment put labour at a premium. With prices already rising at double-digit rates, no employer could refuse to pay a cost-of-living pay rise.

The relative increase in the power of labour at the expense of capital was not however universally popular, nor could it have been, for it meant a loss of relative privileges and the diminution of the status of those who did not work or whose wealth was bound up in the ownership of shares or a private pension.

Signs of a backlash against the unions could be seen in the 1971 film *Carry on at Your Convenience* in which the moustachioed villain Vic Spanner refuses to let his men work or allow them any say over union decisions. Two years later, the Strawbs' sarcastic hit, 'Part of the Union' ('So though I'm a working man I can ruin the government's plan') complained that trade unions turned mere workers into something like supermen. The actor Kenneth Williams wrote in his diary, 'What a scourge and a blight is the English working man! What a dishonest, lazy bastard!'⁹

Numerous voices on the right maintained that behind the industrial militancy of the unions stood some kind of Communist conspiracy. As Rigsby put it in *Rising Damp*, 'Don't you know what's behind these strikes? All this political unrest? Russian gold!' Fears of Communist subversion of politics and industry were widely shared, among mainstream Conservatives as well as supporters of the Front:

John Davies, Heath's former industry minister, told his children that this might be the last Christmas they would be able to enjoy. Heath himself 'relied heavily for advice' on his top civil servant, Sir William Armstrong; by the end of January 1974 Armstrong was talking wildly of coups and coalitions. The head of the CBI tells how, 'We listened to a lecture on how Communists were infiltrating everything. They might even be infiltrating the room he was in.'¹⁰

Yet the idea of an imminent Labour-Communist insurgency was in every way at odds with the increasingly moderate instincts of both parties. Labour had been elected in 1964 on promises of national renewal; a 'new Britain' could be made in the white heat of what Harold Wilson promised would be a new 'scientific revolution'. Labour was shaped by its defeats in the 1950s and consciously subordinating its cloth-cap electorate in favour of a new potential audience of middle-class voters,

the sort of people who in previous elections might have been tempted to vote for the Liberals. From the mid-1960s onwards, voices could be heard on the left warning that Labour was losing the support of working-class voters who saw the party as too moderate. In 1968, for example, the philosopher Alasdair Macintyre gave a broadcast on BBC radio, listing the ways in which Wilson's government had disappointed its supporters. Labour had become obsessed with the task of conquering inflation. It railed against unofficial strikes. It adopted unemployment as a positive measure to be used to combat wage demands. Labour was silent in face of calls for home rule for Scotland and the party was also increasingly hostile to welfare beneficiaries. These moves needed to be seen as part of a single effort to reorient the Labour Party away from its roots. 'If I am right,' Macintyre mused, 'what we are experiencing [is] not just another swing of the pendulum . . . but a permanent shift of the working class, perhaps not merely away from the Labour Party but even from the electoral system.'¹¹

Three years later, Peter Sedgwick, a psychologist and a former activist in the New Left of the 1950s, argued that the institutions of the British left were failing to satisfy their social base and declining in consequence. Sedgwick contrasted the respect with which hundreds of thousands of workers would have viewed Labour MPs as recently as the early 1950s with the contempt that was felt twenty years later. Recalling a march in 1955, when thousands of trade unionists had gathered with their banners outside Parliament to protest against German rearmament, Sedgwick wrote:

nowadays you would not get a militant lobby like that, simply because very few workers would have enough faith in Parliament to take a day off and come down to London to waste their time and breath. The streets of London are held now less often by workers than by bands of middle-class radical youth, wave after wave of whom has known its brief hour of rebellion, before graduating into private careers and private opinions. The working class cannot graduate.¹²

The Labour Party won the two general elections of 1974. Labour left-wingers Tony Benn and Michael Foot joined the Cabinet, while the TUC was brought into contact with the government. Yet the number of strikes fell, before rallying briefly in winter 1978–1979. Labour reduced spending on public services. As expenditure fell, inequality rose. The period of the Wilson-Callaghan government became a time of sharp popular disillusionment, paving the way for the Conservatives' victory in 1979.

Giving the Marx Memorial Lecture in March 1978, Eric Hobsbawm, historian and leading theoretician of the Communist Party of Great Britain, warned that Britain was changing. For a hundred years, the United Kingdom had been a uniquely proletarian society with very few rural and hardly any white-collar workers but no longer. As recently as 1964, two-thirds of British people had worked in manual occupations; by 1976, this had shrunk to barely half. This proportion,

he warned, would fall further in the years to come. Hobsbawm feared that what he called ‘the peculiar structure of British trade unionism’ was already proving inadequate to the demise of large manufacturing workplaces, the rise of the public sector and the long-term dependence of millions of people on social security.¹³

The greatest factor in explaining the mood of working-class disenchantment with Labour was the rise in unemployment. As a result of Heath’s efforts in 1972–1973, unemployment had fallen to a figure of little more than half a million. It rose again in 1973 but not to its previous level. As late as January 1975, there were still only 678,000 people registered as without work. By the end of the year, however, this number had risen to 1,129,000. Throughout 1976, unemployment remained over a million. In December 1976, the jobless figure was up again to 1,273,000. Such persistent mass unemployment had not been seen in Britain since the 1930s.

At first, Chancellor of the Exchequer Denis Healey let it be known that he planned to reduce unemployment. As late as November 1974, he complained that if the Tories had their way a million people would lose their jobs, a prospect he described as ‘morally obscene’. By April 1975, however, inflation was running at 33 per cent, more than five times higher than the equivalent in France, Italy, or West Germany. Healey responded by reinventing himself as a convert to ‘monetarism’, the ideological weapon of the right within the Conservative Party. Public spending was cut from 46 per cent in 1976 to under 40 per cent two years later. Taxes for the richest were cut from 70 to 65 per cent. Healey insisted that no employer should concede to a pay rise above 4.5 per cent. For the first time in post-war British life, the newspapers began to report instances of profitable companies shedding thousands of employees, such as textile giant Courtaulds, which made 20,000 staff redundant between 1972 and 1975, during three years of repeated record profits.

In July 1978 and in a sharp piece of political opportunism, the Conservatives produced a poster showing a line of the supposed unemployed waiting in a queue (the men and women photographed were in fact well-heeled volunteers from Hendon Young Conservatives) under the headline, ‘Labour Isn’t Working’. The papers made the image ubiquitous. ‘We’d have been drummed out of office’, Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher maintained, ‘if we’d had this level of unemployment.’¹⁴

Sarah Cox and Robert Golden described the impact of youth unemployment:

Young kids feel there is no harm adding to the ugliness around them, school leavers, rejected the adult world of work, vent their frustration on their surroundings. What else is there for them? . . . There is nowhere to go, nothing to do.¹⁵

Mass redundancies had a catastrophic effect on the labour movement. The places where jobs were lost (larger workplaces, heavy industry, the North) were Labour’s strongholds. In winter 1978–1979, Dave Widgery, anti-fascist writer and East End doctor, complained that

Whole regions of Britain are slipping quietly off the industrial map . . . British Leyland, Dunlop, Triang, Massey Ferguson, Singers, British Shipbuilding have announced major closures. Go to Liverpool or Wigan or Skelmersdale and see the bleakness in the streets and the despair in the faces.¹⁶

Because you were there

All these processes were the context to the upsurge of racism against migrants that was visible as the decade wore on. The 1970s were not a decade of mass immigration: in every single year except 1979, more people left the UK than settled here. Yet large numbers of British people had still not come to terms with the reality of Commonwealth migration which had begun in 1948 with the arrival of the *SS Empire Windrush* and continued until Labour's Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968. At the end of the Second World War, the white British had been the rulers of the world; now they had to share even their own country with their former subjects. According to the sociologists Robert Miles and Anne Phizacklea, 'New Commonwealth immigrants come from former British colonies, they are the "natives" who were conquered and their arrival in Britain serves to symbolise the decline of the British Empire and current economic ills.'¹⁷ The political psychologist Michael Billig's interviews with supporters of the National Front record their claims that black people had lower intelligence than whites. They thought that Africans and Asians were ungrateful for the gift of empire and incapable of developing their own culture. They maintained that black people were 'taking over' Britain. In the words of two of his sources:

[I]f we'd left them to it . . . they'd be swinging about the trees, eating coconuts and things and dancing around fires and whatever. Everything that the black man has got he owes to the white man.

It is frightening to think that these strange people should be massing all around you all the time and doing things contrary to your culture . . . and not conforming or anything and not trying to live in peace with us in any way and just sticking in their separate cliques.¹⁸

At the end of the War, all British subjects (i.e. citizens of the UK or of its colonies) had enjoyed the right to enter and remain in the country. It was not so much the law which prevented the inhabitants of India or Tanzania from moving to London but the time and expense of travel. The *Empire Windrush's* 1948 journey from Jamaica to London lasted four weeks. But as the 1950s gave way to the 1960s, these practical barriers were reduced. By 1962, the year in which the film *Dr No* showed James Bond flying from London to Jamaica, the journey could be done in just 36 hours.¹⁹

The entitlement of all British subjects, both black and white, to travel at will remained the position in law until the passage of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962.²⁰ The 1962 Act was supposed to be a temporary measure which would

last for no more than five years. It distinguished between UK citizens (people born in the UK or with a passport issued in the UK), who were protected from immigration control and Commonwealth citizens (defined by their holding of a passport issued outside the UK) who were not. After 1962, only the former retained the right to remain in Britain. As for the latter, they could travel to and settle in the United Kingdom only if they held employment vouchers from the Ministry of Labour, were students, members of the armed forces, or could support themselves and their dependent without working. The impact of the legislation was also softened to some extent by the terms of various independence treaties, including those which the UK made with Kenya and Uganda, which protected the UK citizenship of the country's white and Asian minorities.

After 1964, Harold Wilson's Labour government sought to deal with the problem of racist hostility to immigrants in two ways. A further Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968 was introduced, converting the temporary 1962 measures into permanent barriers to further immigration. After the 1968 Act, Commonwealth citizens would have the right to enter the UK only if they had a parent or grandparent with British citizenship. This was the 'drawbridge' moment at which mass Commonwealth migration to the UK ended. Yet while immigration policy had been settled along racial lines, the government insisted that no one else in Britain should discriminate. A Race Relations Act was also passed, giving the Race Relations Board powers to act against discrimination in goods, facilities and services.

The demand that black British people, many of whom were 'only' first- or second-generation immigrants, should have equal status with white people struck millions of whites as the most grotesque infringement of *their* rights. This was the theme of Enoch Powell's April 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech. Delivered in Powell's clipped academic tones, coldly, with its author looking pale and clutching at his script, the message was that any laws to protect black people in Britain from racial discrimination would be a gross injustice to the white majority. The Race Relations Act, Powell insisted, would make whites an underclass in their own country: 'The sense of being a persecuted minority which is growing among ordinary English people in the areas of the country which are affected is something that those without direct experience can hardly imagine.'

Speaking to an audience who had been watching over the last two weeks the news from America, where the murder of Martin Luther King had led to riots in a dozen US cities, Powell was not shy of warning of the threat of black militancy: 'That tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic but which there is interwoven with the history and existence of the States itself, is coming upon us here.'

In Britain and in America, Powell maintained, when blacks and Asians pretended to ask for equality, they were lying. They were not in search of equal status but rather the creation of a new racial hierarchy where they would enjoy all the privileges which under the British Empire had been reserved for whites alone:

For these dangerous and divisive elements, the legislation proposed in the Race Relations Bill is the very pabulum they need to flourish. Here is the means of showing that the immigrant communities can organise to consolidate their members, to agitate and campaign against their fellow citizens and to overawe and dominate the rest with the legal weapons which the ignorant and the ill-informed have provided.

This fear of domination provided the context to Powell's warning of civil unrest: 'As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see "the River Tiber foaming with much blood".'²¹

The Conservative leader Edward Heath, rightly perceiving Powell's speech as a bid for the leadership of the party, dismissed him from the shadow Cabinet. In the week that followed Enoch Powell's removal, there were several marches in his support and other signs that hundreds of thousands and perhaps millions of people agreed with him. Some twenty workplaces, including the Smithfield meat market, witnessed unofficial walkouts in support of Powell. The largest of these racist strikes occurred on the London docks and was led by Harry Pearman, a supporter of the Christian anti-Communist campaign, Moral Rearmament. The strike movement among the dockers spread from the wharves in Poplar to Wapping and from there to Deptford, Southwark and Bermondsey, with perhaps a third of London's 20,000 dockers joining walkouts calling for Powell's reinstatement.²²

At the time of Powell's speech, Micky Fenn was member of the Communist Party. Fenn describes how, in a fit of desperation, his fellow Marxists suggested that they could disarm the increasing support for racism by calling a mass meeting. The Communists were worried that without outside help they would fail to persuade their fellow workers. Accordingly, they settled on the expedient of inviting two priests, one Anglican and one Catholic, to put a message of universal brotherhood against racism. The dockers were not impressed:

Danny Lyons, member of the Communist Party . . . called a meeting. It wasn't that well attended – say five, six hundred people. But he got this priest to go forward to the stage. And that was like a fire just going out, embers dying off and someone chucking a can of petrol over it and it blowing up. And my blokes were really, really sick, because they had never had a situation in the dock when anybody came from outside intervening in our affairs. Anyway, it completely flared up and then they said they're going to have a march. It was the only time I felt really ashamed to be a docker and when I watched it on the television I felt really sick, I mean it was disgraceful.²³

A young Northumbria-born socialist Jim Nichol was working as a full-timer for another left-wing group, the International Socialists. In 1968, he drove IS's one docker Terry Barrett to the same meeting. 'Terry was magnificent,' Nichol recalls:

he said, 'If you stand with Powell you're standing with the bosses.' Other dockers threw coins at him as he spoke. When the motion was put to a vote, the left got just five votes. Terry sobbed afterwards. It nearly broke the guy.

Another anti-fascist, Dave Widgery, was a medical student at the time of Powell's speech. He happened upon one of the dockers' gatherings outside Parliament and was struck by the quiet dignity with which the dockers waited for their hero, how willing they were to put up with Powell's 'authority and arrogance'. In the days that followed, Widgery was teaching an evening class for young dockers, 'Powell had entered a vacuum. The dockers were already pissed off with Labour. They had no traditional loyalties like their parents. They were fairly cynical about unions but extremely class-conscious. The Left had no influence on them.'²⁴

A second moment of racial antagonism occurred in 1972, with the immigration of Asians from Uganda, formerly a British colony, which had been independent only since 1962. Its first leader, Milton Obote, was regarded by the British as insufficiently anti-Soviet and they welcomed his ouster in a 1971 army coup. Obote's replacement Idi Amin was invited on a state visit to Britain and *The Telegraph* described him as a 'staunch friend of Britain'.²⁵ Yet by 1972, Amin's language had changed and he soon came to be seen as the very embodiment of the type that Powell had warned against, the black leader dominating all around him. In August 1972, Amin instructed his country's 6,000 Asian citizens to leave Uganda within ninety days. But they were British passport holders. Edward Heath and his ministers were horrified at the prospect of allowing in such a number of migrants. Heath's special envoy Geoffrey Rippon offered the Asians £2,000 (later reduced to £750) if they would renounce their British passports. But the offer received few takers. Amin brought the discussion repeatedly back to his country's colonial past, telling journalists, 'This is British imperialism. I am not going to listen to imperialist advice.' There was a protest march against the Ugandan Asians by Smithfield meat porters. Leicester's Labour council took out advertisements in Ugandan newspapers warning that the city was 'virtually full'. Enoch Powell claimed that elderly of Britain were living in 'actual physical fear' at the prospect of the Ugandan Asians' arrival. Such views did not make Powell unpopular. Both in 1972 and 1973, BBC viewers voted him their Man of the Year.²⁶

The ultimate significance of Powell was not, however, his championing of these views but his inability to win over the Conservative Party to a policy of anti-migrant hostility. From Powell's failure, still more strident voices would emerge.

Notes

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- 19 BOAC's 1962 timetables have been published online at <http://timetableimages.com/timages/complete/ba62/ba62-11.jpg> (accessed 2 June 2018).
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- 21 The speech was reproduced in the *Daily Telegraph*, 6 November 2007. Interviews with food-processing workers in Willesden in 1976 showed a similar obsession with the supposed unfairness of the Race Relations Act: Miles and Phizacklea, *Racism*, pp. 112–113.
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