
Not just Peterloo

The Anti-Apartheid march to the Springbok match,
Manchester, 26 November 1969

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Abstract

There were protests at all twenty-two matches played by the white South African Springboks rugby team in their tour of Great Britain and Ireland November 1969-January 1970. Students were key to organising these protests, some with significant involvement of trade unions and religious organisations. The Manchester match saw the largest turnout of marchers in Britain, the largest police mobilisation and the largest number of arrests. As at all matches, the police were able to prevent more than limited disruption. The Manchester protest gives a picture of the student movement of the time and how popular protest was policed during the brief period before trade union and anti-fascist mobilisation came to dominate in the 1970s with policing tactics changing in response.

Key words: Anti-apartheid, students, protest, police

150 years since Peterloo

August 1969 saw the 150th anniversary of Peterloo. Nellie Beer, Conservative chair of the Town Hall Committee, was dismissive. 'I don't think there will be a lot done. I have no very strong feelings about it. There's always somebody who wants to commemorate something'.¹ In fact, there was a lot going on including a sharp argument triggered by a new book, Robert Walmsley's weighty *Peterloo: the case reopened*, which argued that Peterloo was a tragedy, not a massacre. W.H. Challoner, co-editor of a recent edition of Engels's *Condition of the Working Class in England* backed Walmsley and claimed

To a generation that has seen the resurrection of 'The Black Dwarf' and is familiar with the ugly undertones (and overtones) of today's

demonstrations, the prophetic fears expressed by Colonel Ralph Fletcher of Bolton to the home office in 1818 seem reasonable enough ...²

It was the March 1968 anti-Vietnam War demonstration outside the US Embassy that triggered Challoner's concern. Under the heading 'Violent protest' *The Times* had editorialised about an 'escalation' ... 'bigger and bloodier than any related demonstration in England so far'. It went on to argue 'There is a growing attachment to subviolence among some of the politically impassioned young'.³

Public order policing had not been an important issue for most of the 1960s. The Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, CND, by far the largest movement of the decade, was committed to non-violence even when it came to mass arrests. Speaking in 1969 to an American audience, Eric Johnston, Chief Inspector of Constabulary for England and Wales, saw rising crime as 'a far greater challenge than maintaining the Queen's Peace'. While asserting that 'Student unrest today has taken the place of labour unrest of the earlier part of this century', he insisted

It is a tradition of long standing that persons may assemble together to air a common view or grievance provided they do not go beyond the limits of the law ... and the police have a duty to protect the right of free speech.⁴

This was to be done

... rely[ing] solely upon traditional methods and we are not provided with special equipment like shields, water cannons, helmets or arms ... It is, I feel, right to say that public confidence in the ability of the Service ... has been more than fully justified, particularly as a result of the way in which the police handled the disturbances outside your Embassy in London, last year.⁵

Writing a year earlier, P.D. Knights, assistant chief constable of Birmingham, took a less phlegmatic view

The events in Grosvenor Square in October 1967, and March 1968, in Stockport in 1967, and elsewhere in recent months, are clear pointers that we cannot be complacent and assume that 'it can't happen here'. We simply cannot rely on the traditional sense of fair play of the British. Moods and attitudes change very quickly ...⁶

Knights recognised that labour unrest had not disappeared as a public order issue. His reference to Stockport was to the demonstrations in support of the Roberts Arundel strikers throughout 1967, notably one in February when a march by two thousand workers saw over two hundred windows in the strike-bound factory smashed.

From the mass strikes of 1842 and 1926, to protests against unemployment benefit cuts in 1931, demonstrations against Mosley in 1934 and 1962, and mass pickets in support of the Roberts Arundel strikers in February and September 1967, popular mobilisations in Manchester presented repeated challenges to the local state. These never found the state without sufficient force. Charles Napier's boast of 1839 that it was the state, not protestors, which could deploy decisive physical force was no less true in 1969, when Lancashire Chief Constable, William Palfrey, heading the second largest force in the country, was in charge. As with Napier and his successors, the issue he faced was not whether he had enough force at his disposal but how he chose to use it.

The 'friendly bobby' image associated with the long-running BBC drama 'Dixon of Dock Green' was being replaced in the popular imagination by the grittier, less comfortable picture of policing presented in ITV's 'Z-Cars' whose early episodes had been made with Palfrey's assistance.⁷ The reality on the ground in Manchester was far worse. The policing of Moss Side led to a demonstration against police brutality being organised by the Campaign against Racial Discrimination, only called off at the last minute after much politicking involving the chief constable and the Dean of Manchester Cathedral, Alfred Jowett, a leading figure in local 'race relations'.

Palfrey was known as 'a copper's copper', a safe pair of hands with a reputation for efficiency.⁸ He was not one to rock the boat.⁹ Interestingly, he was not against demonstrations *per se* and together with the local bishop co-sponsored a ten thousand strong, overwhelmingly male, march through Blackburn in January 1971. Afterwards Palfrey told the press it was 'not to protest against anything but simply to say they favour a Christian code of conduct'.¹⁰

He was not operating in the dark. The Stop the Seventy Tour (STST), the main group organising the protests against the Springboks had been successfully infiltrated by the Special Branch. Mike Ferguson, the STST no. 2, deputy to its leading figure, Peter Hain, was a Special Branch agent. When plans were made to spray metal tacks on the Twickenham pitch in the last match of the tour, Ferguson leaked the plan so police were ready, equipped with magnets.¹¹ Whether it was organising transport or planning sabotage, Special Branch reports show that local activists were being closely watched.¹² It is most unlikely that there was any great concern when a secret meeting was organised and

[s]ome militants met a few weeks before the demo (strict security, everyone had to be vouched for by two other people).¹³

The possibility of violence could not be ignored. Malcolm X had made a strong impression in a packed meeting when he addressed Manchester students a few weeks before he was assassinated in February 1965. The black power Black Unity and Freedom Party was active in the city. Two-hundred Manchester students had been at the battle outside the US embassy in March 1968.¹⁴ Manchester students were arrested on the picket line supporting the long running Roberts Arundel strike in Stockport. Two of the strike organisers, leading Communist Party members, John Tocher and Bernard Panter were now calling on workers to join the march.

The Home Secretary

Palfrey could be confident of firm support from above. Home Secretary James Callaghan took policing seriously. As a backbencher he had been the Police Federation's first parliamentary adviser. After the Conservatives' third successive election victory in 1959 he had seriously considered working for it full time. Now in his second of the four great ministerial positions, he needed to make a success of the job if he was to succeed Harold Wilson as Labour leader. As the Chancellor of the Exchequer he was mostly remembered for failing to stop the sterling devaluation in November 1967. His first days in his new post had gone badly. Just ten days after being appointed, he shocked a meeting with forty backbench Labour MPs when he suggested arms sanctions against South Africa be dropped.¹⁵ Two months later, he was key to steamrolling the Commonwealth Immigrants Act through parliament in three days, removing the rights of Kenyan Asians to come to Britain as they were increasingly threatened by the Kenyan government's 'Africanisation' programme. Many, not only on the left, supported the criticism that this was the most shameful piece of legislation ever to be passed by parliament. It certainly created the opportunity for Enoch Powell's notorious 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968.

The Springboks

With rugby the national game for most white South Africans, especially the Afrikaner community, no one took the Springbok tour more seriously than the South African government as an opportunity to boost apartheid's image. The Springboks had many supporters, and the biggest matches

had tens of thousands of spectators. According to an Opinion Research Centre survey

the vast majority of British people did not support the interruption of Springbok matches. Some 88% of the people interviewed thought politics should be left out of sport and only 7% thought it proper to refuse to play South African teams.¹⁶

South African intelligence was also active. In March 1970, a private detective agency admitted being paid fifty guineas by a 'right-wing, pro-South Africa' MP to spy on MPs active in the Anti-Apartheid Movement.¹⁷ Anonymous support from South Africa also provided National Front members with 'heavily subsidised and maybe free' tickets to attend and 'display a number of big banners' at the England-South Africa game at Twickenham in December.¹⁸

Students

On the third morning of the April 1969 Student Christian Movement (SCM), congress, themed 'Response to Crisis', in the Manchester Free Trade Hall, a delegate Chris Duncan announced

Some of us are going across the street to occupy the South African Airways as a symbolic act. We have sat here for two days talking and this is one simple demonstration of action.

Between sixty and seventy students left to occupy the office, handing out 'South Africa is a shop window for oppression' leaflets. The police quickly arrived, some delegates left the occupation, others were ejected, six were arrested. The following morning around 1,000 delegates, two thirds of the congress joined a silent vigil outside the office.¹⁹

Co-sponsored by the Communist Party of Great Britain, the Young Liberals, the Anti-Apartheid Movement and others, the congress focused on race and poverty. Dom Helder Camara, the radical Archbishop of Recife, made a keynote speech listing racism, colonialism and war among the deadly sins of the contemporary world and denouncing capitalism as egoistic, selfish and cruel.²⁰ The congress heard calls for 'intensive campaigns involving civil disobedience "to force the Government to square up to racial and poverty problems"'.²¹

In March 1968, 150 Manchester students had prevented Patrick Gordon Walker, Secretary of State for Education, from giving a lecture in the university.²² In early November 1969, police intervened to stop

students leafleting passengers at Manchester Airport in protest against the detention of immigrants in an 8ft by 8ft, unventilated, sparsely furnished cell.²³ By November 1969, as the all-white South African Springbok team arrived at Heathrow to be confronted by two dozen Reading University students, Manchester was an important centre of the student movement. As Ernest Rodker put it, this

... was blossoming and there were various activities going on in the student movement. The students were terribly important because the rugby tour was going to university towns and playing university teams ... And so the students were very involved in coming out and demonstrating against the matches. So it just coalesced really.

This was the moment that, after years of domination by the right wing, at its spring conference in 1969, the left succeeded in getting its candidate, Jack Straw, elected as NUS president. Calling for the 'no politics' clause in the NUS constitution to be removed, he backed protests against the US war in Vietnam. The November conference, two weeks after the Springboks arrived, voted to participate in non-violent demonstrations against the Springboks

Non-violent demonstrators against the current tour of Great Britain and Ireland by the South African rugby team received overwhelming support yesterday. This came in the form of a unanimous vote in favour of a comprehensive motion on the subject ...²⁴

However, the issue of violence divided delegates

During the debate, Mr Richard Davies, an executive member of NUS and last year's [Liverpool] Guild President, came out strongly in favour of deleting the words 'non-violent' from the motion. Conference having decided to support the Zimbabwe Freedom Fighters, Mr Davies said it is hypocritical to participate only in non-violent, ineffectual demonstrations.²⁵

Straw now made 'a fighting speech' in support of forthcoming protests. Summing up the conference, he argued that it represented a change in the union. It was now offering more than just educational or commercial services. It was

... stand[ing] for an end to privilege in education, and through that, an end to privilege in our society. This Union stands for democracy and real democracy in this country.²⁶

The shift in student politics to include confronting the state provided the starting point for the Revolutionary Socialist Student Federation (RSSF) delegate conference in March 1969, in Manchester. As with other revolutionary student organisations in Europe and elsewhere, the focus was on the failure of the May '68 *événements* to bring about revolutionary change. Fierce arguments on strategy dominated, whether to build red bases in universities, or to direct student activism towards working class politics.²⁷ For some the anti apartheid movement was marginal. The best-known paper of the revolutionary left, *Black Dwarf*, mentioned the Springboks protests only briefly.²⁸ Others saw it as an opportunity to draw workers into activity, *Socialist Worker*, paper of the International Socialists, the largest of the revolutionary groups at Manchester University, called for support for the anti-Springbok protests.

Anti Apartheid

The SCM protests in and outside the SAA office stood a long tradition of organised opposition to apartheid in Manchester. In 1952, as the apartheid regime was being established, the Colonial Defence Association organised a meeting in Moss Side opposing racial discrimination in South Africa, chaired by Len Johnson, the leading local Communist and former champion boxer, prevented by the British Boxing Board of Control's colour bar from taking any titles.²⁹

Nationally, the Boycott Movement had been founded by South African exiles in 1959, adopting the name Anti-Apartheid Movement (AAM), after the Sharpeville Massacre in 1960. Locally, in July 1960, there was a silent demonstration of eight people outside Old Trafford cricket ground led by a Methodist minister with face and hands blackened carrying a rough-hewn cross.

Students were always central to AAM, both nationally and in Manchester, often showing imagination and initiative. Manchester University students voted to support the Boycott Movement as a union with activists also lobbying local businesses to join the South Africa boycott.³⁰ By autumn 1963 AAM had a little under 2,000 members and sixteen branches, including Manchester. 'As a relatively recent arrival from South Africa, who was subjected to many of the evils of Apartheid', Ahmed Choonara, now a student at the university, got involved with AAM.

... [T]he existing members quizzed me about how they could demonstrate support for the subjugated people of South Africa? I considered this for a while and suggested that since we were drawing close to the [fourth] anniversary of the Sharpeville Massacre a symbolic way to

commemorate this as well as demonstrate support would be by having a torch light procession through Manchester City Centre with 69 mock coffins on Saturday 21 March 1964. The 69 mock coffins were to symbolise the 69 innocent people shot dead by the South African police as well as the hundreds of people shot in the back in Sharpeville, South African ... part of a peaceful protest against the iniquities of the Pass Laws. This was agreed at the meeting, and on the 21 March 1964, we marched through the City Centre ... to show our solidarity with the oppressed peoples of South Africa. The Manchester University students, who were members of Anti Apartheid movement, did a magnificent job constructing the 69 mock coffins and producing a multitude of torches.³¹

While the boycott failed to stop South African trade continuing to expand at an impressive rate, AAM was part of the successful international campaign that kicked South Africa out of the Commonwealth in 1961. South Africa was suspended from the Tokyo Olympics in 1964. Gaining cross-party support, AAM's membership included most Labour MPs, including many in the cabinet.

With government policy to keep trading with South Africa in everything apart from arms, the potential for being pulled both ways was real. Harold Wilson gave up his AAM membership when he became prime minister in 1964. Callaghan was now under pressure. He had to appear evenhanded, respecting the rights of players, fans and protestors. He will also have remembered that both general and local elections were looming and both Lancashire and Manchester councils were currently under Conservative control.³²

AAM also found itself pulled in opposing directions. Was the priority to win influence in government circles or to build an active, campaigning, membership? The Admiralty accepted that black crew members would be expected to comply with apartheid laws, when three Royal Navy ships visited South Africa in the summer of 1967. Two Labour ministers, both former AAM presidents, were asked by AAM to resign their government positions. Their refusal to do so shifted AAM away from parliamentary lobbying towards 'a democracy of the streets', to build 'a powerful political base centring not only on political parties but also on the Trade Union Movement, Youth and Student groups and other militant anti-racist organisations'.³³

Non-violent civil disobedience

Calls to protest were getting coverage before the tour started. John Pardoe, Treasurer of the Liberal Party and MP for Cornwall North, appealed to party members

to do all they could to disrupt the forthcoming Springbok Rugby team tour of Britain. 'Sit down all over the pitch if you have to', he told an anti-apartheid movement meeting in Brighton.³⁴

Careful not to lose support, AAM's strategy for the tour was more cautious, avoiding direct action. As Ethel de Keyser, AAM executive member explained, the objective was

to raise anti-apartheid feeling to such a pitch that the tour will become a financial flop with people staying away and the cost of maintaining police protection ... We plan to continue holding demonstrations at the matches, although we do not aim to disrupt them. We aim to stop them. We would like no games to take place ... we're not involved in running onto pitches, pouring on gravel, that sort of thing. I'm not saying we *disapprove* of people doing this, but we are not doing this ourselves.³⁵

While making the tour financially unsustainable failed – clubs paid little more for policing than normal – AAM kept a friendly distance from those ready to use non-violent civil disobedience. These included Peter Hain, the 19-year old chair of the Stop the 70 Tour Committee (STST). Of South African parentage, Hain came from a family with a strong liberal, anti-apartheid tradition. Hain was one of a small group of Young Liberals, who founded STST to prevent the South African cricket team touring in 1970, 'it only became interested in Rugby as a second thought'.³⁶

No one challenged the STST's leadership. Its coordination was loose. Many 'did their own thing'.

Much of the action was also independently organised and carried out. Students from many universities would travel to the Springboks matches and join the protests, often with no direct contact with Hain's group. Anna Davin and a group of Warwick students joined in several of these and thought that they were exciting. They were very organised, making sure they wore the right clothes to minimise getting caught or hurt, and they would 'keep an eye on each other to make sure no-one got left behind or lost'.³⁷ They discussed tactics to work with the group to get through the police lines and did everything they could think of to ensure a successful demonstration.³⁸

Within STST the debate on tactics was about what could be done inside the ground. At no point was there a discussion about what direct action demonstrators marching outside could take beyond raising the profile of the demonstration.

The work of local AAM branches was orderly. Twenty years old in 1969, working as a clerk/typist for the probation service in Strangeways,

Janet Whelan, née Murphy, joined AAM in the late 1960s. With ten or so others she went to regular meetings, mostly at the Abraham Moss Centre in north Manchester.

A group of us used to picket outside – I think it was Sainsbury’s in Harpurhey – on Saturday mornings, handing out leaflets to shoppers and the general public, calling for a boycott of South African goods, in particular Outspan fruit. The leaflets, posters, banners etc. were collected at the previous meeting in the week. Mostly, the reception from the public was pretty good, and the more extreme negative responses – occasional. I remember just a number of times staff/manager at the store asking us to move away from directly at the main door!

... We were expected to give out our own leaflets at such events and outside of the venues. I also recall trying to hand out leaflets outside one of my own local shops, in Prestwich, a fruit and veg shop, outside of which the owner had displayed a long and brightly coloured banner, advertising Outspan oranges. I remember him taking me to task by pointing out that, no doubt I listened to rock n roll/pop music, when in fact the stylus on the arm of my record player (!) would contain a small piece of diamond ... and from where? South Africa. I remember wrestling with that one with my brothers at home, as to how to respond!³⁹

The Springboks tour was an opportunity for trade unionists to improve the unions’ poor record on race. Despite the problem of getting time off work on a Wednesday afternoon, the student lead helped move trade unionists into action. Union organisations where the Communist Party had influence responded best: the main engineering union, the AEF, the draughtmen’s union, DATA, the scaffolders, the CEU and Manchester and Salford Trades Council. The Trades Council issued a call on the region’s 1,500,000 trade unionists ‘to join the organised opposition to the fixture making known the opposition in every possible way’.⁴⁰

Three Christian groups came together for the demonstration. All ninety Methodist ministers in the Manchester area were given ‘a semi-official’ invitation to take part and appeals for support made by Anglican ministers, the Anglican chaplains at Manchester and Salford universities and the Manchester branch of Christian Non-violent Action. Basil Hetherington, Manchester University Anglican Chaplain insisted he did not want his demonstration ‘to turn against the police. I want to picket the ground and shame all the spectators who go to watch’.⁴¹

Not all priests supported the demonstration. The Bishop of Manchester told the Manchester Diocesan Conference

I've been told there is a likelihood of violence. So those Christians who are interested have opted out of the demonstration and are going to make their protest at a service ... [the day before the march] at the cathedral.⁴²

Policing

Leicester, 8 November, was the second fixture of the tour. A thousand police confronted the demonstrators, a few of whom were inside the ground and had briefly got onto the pitch. Afterwards the local chief constable claimed

Today you have seen all that is best in the British copper ... I think everybody was quite happy with the outcome. The demonstrators demonstrated and the game was played.⁴³

The *Sunday Telegraph* report suggested it was not so straightforward

In a scene of the utmost confusion policemen, demonstrators and Saturday afternoon shoppers could be seen leaning against the walls in pain or doubled up on the road, writhing in agony. One young constable was doubled up in pain after a heavy kick in the groin. Suddenly a flurry of policemen burst from the side of the road. They scattered the demonstrators, pushing many of them face down in the road. Two reporters of the *Sunday Telegraph* were held in the air and thrown against a brick wall, suffering cut arms and slight cuts to the face. Shaken housewives returned to their homes in side streets near the ground weeping. Some lost half their shopping under thousands of thudding boots.⁴⁴

A police sergeant and twenty-one demonstrators were taken to hospital. The STST committee received thirty-eight documented complaints. John Sturrock, Leicester University Students Union secretary, said there would be 'a do or die' attempt to halt the match planned at Manchester. 'People are in a very ugly mood now'.⁴⁵

After the violence a week later at Swansea, where sixty-three people were arrested, Callaghan told the House of Commons:

Inside the ground, a number of demonstrators broke on to the pitch just after half-time. Stewards had been engaged by the Swansea Rugby Football Club to remove demonstrators from the pitch. The task of the police in such circumstances is extremely difficult. They have a duty to

assist the stewards where physical force is necessary to remove intruders. At the same time, they have a duty to preserve the peace.

These developments are placing a very heavy responsibility on the police service. I have, therefore, decided to call a conference of chief constables in those areas where games are still to be played ... Among the questions that I shall ask to be examined is the extent to which stewards are helpful.⁴⁶

On Monday 24 November, as Jack Straw was speaking to NUS conference, Callaghan was with chief constables from twenty match areas, including Manchester. It was agreed that stewards were to be barred from clearing demonstrators from the pitch. This should be left to trained police. The right to demonstrate was to be protected and a senior police officer should be present at any station where demonstrators were being charged in order to hear the charges and receive complaints. Anyone charged should receive their full civil rights and be able to communicate with anyone. At the same time, Callaghan pointed out

We are also getting the usual job lot of anarchists – people who are not interested in supporting a cause but in causing disruption. One can be sure that, if you get a group of anarchists attached to a procession, whatever the leaders of the procession have agreed with the police, the anarchists will not carry it out. I am very concerned to see that the police are not made the butt of mischief makers and those seeking violence.⁴⁷

All police leave was cancelled. The Old Trafford match was to have almost 2,000 police, the biggest ever police turnout in Lancashire, including a mounted contingent of 200.⁴⁸ Palfrey told a briefing of 120 senior officers he was 'setting the pattern of the police approach to anti-apartheid demonstrators for the rest of the Springbok tour'. The Manchester student organisers

have been given permission to hold a peaceful demonstration march to the ground – 'That is what it is going to be', said Mr Palfrey. Stewards would be allowed to concern themselves within the ground with rugby supporters. 'We have said clearly that vigilantes are not acceptable'. Invasion of the pitch will not be tolerated. 'Your job is to keep the pitch clear and let the match proceed'.⁴⁹

The overwhelming majority of demonstrators were committed to peaceful protest. The 'job lot of anarchists' Callaghan referred to was small.

The STST outlined its tactics in ‘Confidential: Briefing on Twickenham November 22’

The only way we are going to stop the tour is by going on the pitch and disrupting matches. Punch-ups outside the ground do not achieve anything positive – non-violent militancy inside does. At Twickenham our protests will be in two parts, ‘Chanters’ ... those not wishing to go on the pitch who will form up at the players tunnel and make as much noise as possible, ‘Disruptors’, who come in groups and get down to the front of the terraces up against the fence. Dress respectably. Action will be heralded by a small STST group soon after the start ... Get over the fence by getting your front members to bend down and form a ‘human ramp’ with their backs. Once on ... sit-down and link arms back to back with your feet facing outwards. At all times refrain from provoking violence. If you have been pulled free do not resist, but do not help either – get carried off ... For further information please contact Peter Hain.⁵⁰

Many of the more experienced activists drew on their experiences of CND. Ernest Rodker, an activist involved in the STST remembered being in a group that

... started to commit itself to trying to interrupt the [Springboks] tour and started planning and looking at those activities. And as that was something that I had been very involved in with the Committee of 100 and CND and anti-nuclear weapons activities and had been arrested and imprisoned on those issues, I was very much for that type of activity ... It was a loose-knit group. I remember ... with one or two people, going out to the airport on the night before the tour arrived and painting the road ... ‘Go home’ – whatever it was we painted, ‘Springboks’ – or something ... And we formed a small group separately from the main Stop the Seventy Tour, where we took part in sort of extra-mural activities.⁵¹

An untitled, unsigned leaflet showed that some saw the possibility of out-manoeuvring the police.

Instead of the old era mass stroll through the streets of London in which we merely asserted our revolutionary determination, we are now placed in situations which actually test that determination and our ability and willingness to translate it into results ... Again, comparing this with earlier London demos, the current campaign changes

the demonstration from an event in and for itself, to a series of events through which we can increase our strength numerically ('politicization' became a real thing rather than a cliché at Swansea) and develop our force strategically.⁵²

It went on to propose using 'a number of smaller, well-organised, "guerilla" groups' with

an increasing emphasis on individual as well as mass action especially in connection with the disruption of play. There is a range of activities which can be initiated by individuals but where large groups would only attract the attention of armies of fuzz.⁵³

With matches now 'all-ticket', organising inside the ground was ever more difficult. While this had an impact on the number of spectators – the Old Trafford match was one of only two where the number of demonstrators matched the number of spectators – the forged tickets produced for the Old Trafford match had little or no success.⁵⁴

Countdown

Peter Hain was in Liverpool the week before the march. Speaking with Aziz Pahad, a member of the African National Congress, he told a 300 strong meeting that 200 Liverpool university students would be on the march.⁵⁵ In the event 'around 25 double-deckers and coaches took more than 1000 students from Liverpool University'.⁵⁶ A local rugby ground in Salford had its goalposts sawn down. Rugby Collegiate club in Liverpool suffered the same with anti-apartheid slogans painted on walls around the ground.⁵⁷

Wednesday afternoon was without lectures, making it easier for contingents from universities and colleges in the north of England to join the demo. Some arranged time off work. Some, like Mike Luft, absented themselves. Mike had helped recruit Rugby League players to support the march, some of them motivated by the traditional class based hostility between League and Union.⁵⁸ Peter Winterbottom remembers this as one reason he joined the march.⁵⁹

The main organiser and spokesperson was Dave Wynn, Manchester University Students Union (MUSU) president and member of the Communist Party. For the students it was an officially approved demonstration. The weekly student union newsletter, *4W* announced

... the DEMONSTRATION AGAINST THE SPRINGBOKS ON WEDNESDAY, starting from All Saints, when a large proportion of

the membership as well as all other colleges of Manchester, with 60% of the surrounding constabulary set off on a march.⁶⁰

The day before the match, the *Manchester Evening News* predicted ‘the biggest confrontation yet between the police and anti-apartheid demonstrators’ with ‘more than 3,000 students and members of religious organisations, political groups and trade unions ... expected to march’.⁶¹

Match day, Wednesday 26 November

The arrangement with the police was that the march would not pass the front of the ground and its main entrances on Chester Road. The police had banned this, giving heavy traffic as their reason. Instead, it would proceed past the back of the stadium, along Talbot Road, in the direction of the Town Hall.

Estimates of the numbers on the march were ranged up to 7,000, the highest figure, ‘7,000 students, clergyman and trade unionists’, came from the *Manchester Evening News*.⁶² Around a hundred protestors had managed to get tickets judged as genuine and were inside the ground ‘continuously chanting anti-apartheid, anti-Springbok slogans besides a number of extra referees’ whistles in the crowd’.⁶³

Police checked people at All Saints for weapons. Six students headed the demonstration carrying a large black coffin painted with the words ‘Remember Sharpeville’. Placards carried slogans such as ‘Springboks: ambassadors of apartheid’. The Young Liberals produced a song-sheet.⁶⁴ Peter Cockcroft remembers it was ‘a bloody long way’ from All Saints to the ground but this does not seem to have affected the turnout. MUSU had the largest banner. There were contingents of students from Salford, Liverpool, Leeds, Sheffield, Bangor, Keele, Hull, Birmingham, Aston, Leicester universities and also colleges of education. The trade union banners included DATA, draughtsmen, AEU, engineers, CEU, scaffolders and Manchester and Salford Trades Council.⁶⁵

According to *Spokesman*, a single sheet student newsletter, subtitled ‘For Conservative and moderate opinion’, the demonstration

... included not only militants but also members of the Conservative Association including three committee members, members of the Christian Union and hundreds of ordinary students who felt, often for the first time in their lives, obliged to demonstrate against the evils of apartheid.⁶⁶

Janet Whelan recalls

feeling so encouraged at the start of the march, by the sheer numbers present, and fully expecting to be able to reach the ground. I remember all the stopping then starting again and finally a feeling of disappointment when we learned the proposed plans weren't going to be allowed ...⁶⁷

According to *Spokesman*, Conservative activist Anthony Renouf played the key role

The march proceeded peacefully as far as Old Trafford, where it came up against police cordons. It was at this point that steward Anthony Renouf pulled off a masterstroke of tactics by successfully splitting the militants off from the official peaceful demonstration ... Renouf ran down the length of the march informing people that there were police cordons across the road and urging them to sit down as a mark of their intention not to clash with the police ... The peaceful demonstration comprising the vast mass of the demonstrators moved forward, waited for some time, heard speeches from a representative of the African National Congress and from a trade unionist leading the DATA delegation, and then regrouped and marched through the city.⁶⁸

Peter Cockcroft remembers what happened when people sat down differently

Getting close to the ground the hard nuts started trotting to the front until the sit down happened at the junction.⁶⁹

Or, as he reported in *Solidarity North West* shortly after the events

At this point the front sector of the march was standing peaceably facing down Talbot Road (i.e. the way they should have been) and waiting for the rest of the marchers to join up. Then, without any warning, the police attacked the front of the march. A wedge of police drove in from the right about 20 yards from the front rank, attacking individual marchers and smashing the Black and White coffin which had been the march figurehead.⁷⁰

Janet Whelan remembers how

suddenly out of nowhere as it seemed, whilst walking along the main road, possibly Talbot Road, with my brother Paul, police on horseback appeared alongside us and the Officer ordering us to get off the road

and get onto the pavement. I just remember the sheer size of him on horseback and I duly complied! Paul didn't, and the Officer shouted down to him to clear off the road and to me to get him off the road.⁷¹

Cockcroft's account

Utter confusion spread immediately. Somehow people reorganised themselves and the march got moving away from the trouble-spot. Any chance of the march holding together and defending itself against a new police attack was gone. Ranks were broken up, groups and individuals scattered. At the second confrontation down Talbot Road when we had a go at the cordon we just didn't have the power left to break it. From that point on the much publicised plan to take the march into the ground was a non-starter. True we push the police 120 yards down Talbot Road. And came within 40 yards of an entry point to the ground but it never really looked possible.⁷²

The Guardian report adds details

Time after time the militants, chanting 'Forward, forward', rushed the police lines. Girls screamed, policemen's helmets were knocked to the ground ... At one time the demonstrators seemed to have beaten the police by sheer weight of numbers. But more police reinforcements were brought forward, and a human barricade six or eight deep took the brunt of the demonstrators' onslaught.⁷³

The Daily Telegraph saw how demonstrators 'threw shoes, clothing, placards and even themselves at the horses but without effect ...'⁷⁴

Two students on the march were interviewed in 1985 by Ronald Fraser for his book *1968: a student generation in revolt*. The first, a female student, recalled

... we ended up in this residential road in Manchester and a line of police stopped us and the Liverpool people were at the front and ... there was this tremendous push from the back ... we were hardly treading ground, we were treading on people's feet and I was terrified I'd go under because the crowd would just trample me ... Then the cordon broke and they brought the police on and when the horses came on, that was the most scaring time really because they just circle the horses round and round, treading on us.

Ronald Fraser: Were you hurt?

Female student: No, not at all because I leapt into somebody's front garden and that was the first time I've seen people badly manhandled. I could see a couple of people being trampled in a front garden by a horse.⁷⁵

The second of those interviewed by Fraser was inside the ground

I was pretty happy when the police turned up. The crowd were a lot nastier than the police. It was very nasty. This was one of the three times in my life when I've been seriously frightened. The bit I was in, the police were calling us in, arresting everyone in sight.

I think a hundred of us got inside the ground. A few people got onto the pitch. They didn't last very long. I think there were a couple of smoke bombs thrown on to the pitch. Later I saw people in really bad shape who'd been kicked around.⁷⁶

Reporting the day

The demonstration was front-page news in much of the press. The march dominated the front page of the *MEN*'s late edition on the day. According to Palfrey

... it was the biggest demonstration that Lancs police had ever had to deal with. There was a small militant group among the marchers who tried to break away – that's when the trouble started. Most of the marchers were nice young people.⁷⁷

At 7:15pm, on the evening of the march, the London *Evening Standard* triggered a debate in the House of Lords with Lord Ferrier reading from it

The heading is: BOKSBATTLE – THE BIGGEST AND ROUGHEST – and 'roughest' applies to the crowds. The article reads: It was the biggest and roughest anti-apartheid demonstration of the Springboks' tour. Three police officers were sent by ambulance to hospital suffering from crushed ribs. It goes on: More than 5,000 people – mainly university students – swarmed over barricades, fought police officers, used their banners as weapons and tried to battle their way into the rugby ground. Girls screamed as they were trodden underfoot. Youths yelled as they linked arms and ran and crashed into the police barricades. They swarmed over the roads, over walls, through the gardens of private houses. Terror-stricken mothers shepherded children indoors and locked themselves inside ... And so it goes on.⁷⁸

There were one-hundred and fifty arrests, more than forty inside the ground, of whom seventy-seven were charged. The rest, according to *The Times*, were released after being addressed by Mr William Palfrey Chief Constable of Lancashire in Stretford police station.⁷⁹

Palfrey added

... there was no evidence of police using excessive force, let alone anything that could be called violence ... He emphasized that the vast majority of the student demonstrators were 'very nice young people' and their own official leaders had done their best to control them. There was however a 'militant lunatic fringe' which as usual tried to join in.⁸⁰

The Guardian reported Palfrey's claim that the operations were 'completely successful'.⁸¹

He decided on well-trying and effective police tactics: 'leaning on them' ... he swamped the apartheid marchers [sic] and the White City ground with policemen ... Although students at Manchester University last night were talking about 'police irregularities', Mr Palfrey had taken the precaution of setting up a complaints office for the day. The Superintendent in charge of it did not receive a single complaint during the day.

At the end of the day Mr Palfrey was able to say: 'The strength of the police is the answer to violent demonstrations. If one has learned a lesson today it is that the militants were confronted with a large number of policemen determined to maintain law and order. This contained them. It frightened them even. Yes, you can say they were frightened'.⁸²

In a letter published the following week in *The Guardian*, Bernard Crick, Professor of Political Theory and Institutions at the University of Sheffield challenged the idea that the police had permitted the demonstrators to exercise their right to protest other than in an empty, formal sense, suggesting Palfrey had not followed the Home Secretary's instructions. The letter concluded

If the right of demonstration is to mean anything, it surely must be allowed in a manner that has some relevance to its objects: either to be seen by the public in busy streets or to get in this case within shouting distance of spectators going to the match. The police are allowing the crazy behaviour of a few to be the excuse for using methods of crowd control which may be very convenient to them, but do represent a substantial denial of civil rights.⁸³

Aftermath

Complaints arose from those arrested immediately. MUSU organised legal support, listed twenty-eight complaints and voted to pay £100, the maximum allowed under rule, to help cover the cost of fines.⁸⁴ Within ten days, the pressure led to Palfrey together with the Chief Constable of Manchester and Salford, his assistant on the day, requesting the Chief Constable of Liverpool and Bootle to organise an independent investigation into complaints that ‘excessive force’ was used by police against demonstrators.⁸⁵ This did not prevent Palfrey being awarded a CBE in the 1970 New Year honours.⁸⁶

Jon Snow remembers

I got arrested and ... defended myself in court. I was charged with assaulting a policeman (rather serious). The somewhat short policeman – 5ft 8” – accepted that he might have kneed me in the groin in the course of ‘perambulation’ so I got him to walk across the court and we measured the maximum height of the upward thrust of his knee whilst walking; the finding was 24”. Sadly for him my groin is 30” above the ground – case dismissed!⁸⁷

When in mid-December the South African Cricket Association announced that its team due to come to Britain the following summer would be selected on a non-racial basis, the well-known cricket commentator John Arlott wrote

It must now seem that the demonstrators, by their action against the Springbok rugby tour, have in a few months achieved more than the cricket officials have done by 15 years of polite acquiescence.⁸⁸

The tour continued, facing protests – a thousand marched at Aberdeen where ‘three invasions of the pitch and ninety-eight demonstrators, twenty-nine of them girls, arrested for breach of the peace ... the occasion was deemed predominantly peaceful’.⁸⁹

Peter Hain argues

Wherever the team went, resting, training or playing, it was under siege. Over Christmas, two months into the tour, the players took a step inconceivable in the annals of Springbok history and voted to go home. But the management, under political pressure, ordered them to stay. The tour finally staggered to an end with the players bitter and

unsettled ... For the first time, the Springboks, accustomed to being lionised, perhaps the leading national rugby team in the world, had instead been treated as pariahs.⁹⁰

Peter Cockcroft went further

After the Manchester demo the Springboks were hounded from match to match. They were never actually stopped from playing a match but this is not a primary importance. The number of 'liberals' on these demos was vast. For all of these the confrontation with the power of the state, the assertion of solidarity in the situation, the lies in court and in the press afterwards leaves a lasting impression. This is not to say that liberal + bashed heads = revolutionary, only that the combined effects of the demonstration contribute to a higher interest in, and a higher awareness of the horrors of apartheid.⁹¹

May 1970, at the government's request, the Cricket Council withdrew the invitation to the South African Cricket Association.⁹² Ernest Rodker argues

... all these activities contributed to ... the fact that the cricket tour was going to be impossible ... [T]he authorities were really determined not to cancel the cricket tour, but gradually their view started to change. And in the end Callaghan ... more or less told them that they had to change their minds and cancel the tour, because he wasn't prepared to put up ... with scenes that happened with the rugby tour with the cricket matches ...⁹³

At the time, history did not seem on the side of the protestors. Janet Whelan remembers

... feeling that, despite all efforts of everyone involved, e.g. meetings, demo's, direct action etc., the evil of apartheid and huge scale of its supporters, governments, multi-national companies etc., world-wide, was so massive, it made me despair that it could ever be changed.⁹⁴

Conclusion

Student militancy was a significant force in Manchester and Liverpool 'strongholds of the left'.⁹⁵ Anti-apartheid was an issue uniting not only the left but liberals and moderate Conservatives. The Manchester demonstration was the largest on mainland Britain because it became the biggest single focus of student opposition to apartheid. This created a momentum

that pulled in organised trade unionists, clerics and others. It can be argued that the experience of the anti-apartheid demo did not dampen militancy, if anything the opposite. In the wave of protests against the 'Warwick files', protesting universities keeping files on students political activities, (February – March 1970), Manchester had the largest occupation in the country: 3,000 students over fifteen days.⁹⁶

As Peter Cockcroft commented

... police tactics were far rougher than they have ever been. We have no knowledge of a march which was keeping to the route and breaking no laws being openly attacked by the police – usually they like to see you to keep to their own rules, this time they openly ignored them.⁹⁷

Despite this, always insisting on the right to protest and the reasonableness of almost all demonstrators, Palfrey won the propaganda war. He could rely on the press being pro-police and less than sympathetic to students. This was a pioneering example of kettling with most of the violence confined to a side street.⁹⁸ The police operation was meticulously planned: the provision of overwhelming force, cameras to film protesters and photograph those arrested. It is hard to see the absence of telephones to contact lawyers as accidental.⁹⁹

Given Palfrey's claim to have frightened the demonstrators, his actions can only be understood as practising the strongest methods of control at his disposal. Here was an opportunity to train police with little experience of demonstrations. Students having little support in the wider population, they were the best subjects for a live exercise.

Palfrey will have had in mind the warnings uttered by Powell, the police failings in Grosvenor Square in March 1968, the solidarity demonstrations supporting the Roberts Arundel. Protecting the Springboks match was a dress rehearsal for future confrontations.

These confrontations came with the strikes and demonstrations of the next two decades. Many on the anti-Springboks protests, gained an understanding of collective organisation's potential and of the role of the police. For all the differences, there are continuities between those who marched to Peter's Fields in 1819, the Manchester anti-Springbok demonstrators and today's climate change protesters.

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Notes

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