

An extract from an interview with John La Rose.

People are unaware of the depth and complexity of the struggle of black people in this country. Radical history is constantly revised by the establishment; nowadays the particular emphasis is on black struggles. We have seen this in relation to the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the family campaign for justice. Attempts are being made to hijack and suppress information on other campaigns.

Many years ago I interviewed John La Rose for the arts and culture journal Variant. Malcolm Dickson was then editor. The interview took place in John's house in Finsbury Park. Malcolm organised the recording apparatus and was present, taking photographs. Having been in the company of John quite often by this time the only plan I had was to start talking. Once begun John would go where he thought necessary and return near enough to the starting point. My job was not to interfere too much.

*A reduced version of the interview was published in Variant in the spring of 1994. John also allowed me to include the fuller interview in my own essay collection, *And the Judges Said . . .*" This allows an insight into some of the richness of the Caribbean side of its social and intellectual tradition; further insight is gained into the inseparable nature of the culture and the political.*

*There is also the matter of John's own centrality to some of the more crucial political interventions in his time. In the following extract from a long interview 1993, John La Rose discusses *The Black People's Day of Action for the New Cross Massacre* and some of the background to that. At the point of entry below, John had been discussing Carnival and its origins, and this led him into . . .*

JLR . . . another aspect of the question that makes Carnival such a dangerous thing. Nobody asked the police or Home Office for permission to make Carnival. When they went into a group and wanted to play Carnival they simply went on the road. It was such a normal thing to do in the Caribbean. And they won that right. There's a Kaiso about it: "The road made to walk on Carnival Day, the road is ours."

All these governments recognize how dangerous it is. People on the streets are always dangerous to governments anyway. The time when Fidel Castro made an attack on the Moncada barracks to overthrow Batista on July 26th, it was the moment of Carnival in Santiago, with all these massive amounts of people on the streets. There's always that danger with Carnival for the authorities, but it's freedom of self-expression and creativity for the mass of the population.

JK: One of the legal things here is that there is no actual right to do anything else when you are on the streets other than walking, to get from A to B. You do not have the right as such to be in the street. You have the freedom to assemble but there's no right for it. I was also thinking of Breach of the Peace. If the Police exercised the powers that they have - theoretically, as I understand it - then they could charge every single person at any time of the day, even being asleep, with Breach of the Peace. And if the full weight of that was ever attempted by the State, it could be revolution, it could be finished in a day. I think the example of Carnival demonstrates something about it. You were talking about how people were scared of this thing. It reminded me of the time when 20,000 people marched in London, bringing the city to a halt, I always have this image of the gents in bowler hats looking out the window saying "What the hell's this coming over the bridge!"

JLR: The Black People's Day of Action for the New Cross Massacre was on the 2nd of March 1981. I will never forget that. It was something that had not happened since the Chartists, back in the 1830s. People had not marched across London into the City. We had to negotiate with the Police, I would chair the meetings. And that decision came from within the meetings of the Black People's Assembly. People would be saying: "Man we have got to do something about this thing. The Police can not get away with this thing!" That kind of talk went on. And they said, "Yes we'll go on a march." "Where are the guns!" That kind of talk "We want some guns!" And I said, "Have you heard of a man called Brigadier Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations*?" If you haven't read his book then you should read it. Because if you are talking about going to Parliament with guns you have to take on Kitson." He had been the Commander in

Northern Ireland, he was G.O.C. in Britain. I said, "Let's talk seriously, you are starting at the end, let's start at the beginning."

We had that sort of interchange all the time at the meetings, very open, free meetings. So they said "OK we'll go on a march." We said, "Well what day are we going to march?" Because the normal marches took place on a Sunday, when nobody's working, everyone's home, the people said that they wanted it to be on a day when the British are bound to take notice. So what day? We had to disrupt British society, that was absolutely clear. That is what we were saying in that movement. We wanted to snarl-up traffic all over London.

So we decided it must be a Monday, that came from within the audience. We wanted to make this place realise that we're serious and we're going to disrupt the whole of British society. We aren't going to work that day. People had been talking about the question of a Black general strike since 1964. That was highly impractical at that time, but the idea was there.

We already had the experience of the first demonstration of about 2,000 outside the house where the massacre took place, there in New Cross Road on the Sunday after the 18th January 1981. We stopped there for hours. The police could not move us from the street. We disrupted the traffic coming from the South of England. They were trying to move us but they did not dare. They could see people were going to burn down the place or something. It ended peacefully and people went away. But on the other day, when we met with the Police from the City of London as well as from the Metropolitan Police, one guy¹ . . . came with a map and told us where we could go and so on. I said, "You listen carefully, we have decided that the route we're going to take is the route. And we're going as far as Blackfriars Bridge. We have to have a further meeting of the Assembly, and when we're finished with that, we'll come back to you again and tell you where else we want to go."

(Commander Polkinghorne) had never met people talking to him quite like that. He was trying to intimidate us. The leading officer from the police never said a word during the negotiations that we had. Then we told (Polkinghorne), "If you do not take us seriously - you are just

¹ Commander David Polkinghorne of the Metropolitan Police.

the Police, we are a political grouping - if you do not understand that then we will deal with the Home Secretary, not with you. So the next time you come to negotiate, you better bring someone with authority." That's what we told him. The next time they brought the Deputy Assistant Commissioner and his aide. By that time we had finished the second part of the route. But the route he wanted to take us was different. But we had the route we wanted, we had it decided. The police are very informed, and we learned a lot about negotiating with them. The police never tell you what *their* own plans are, they only want to know what *your* plans are.

What demonstrations in the past usually did was to march on Hyde Park into Whitehall. We said we were going to go where the people are going to know that this is happening, we're going to march in all those areas - like Peckam - before we come into Blackfriars Bridge. That way you are going to hit that area of London with all those people who are really concerned about what's happening in the whole New Cross area, and then march through the financial centre, the City, and shake up the place, terrify them.

JK: It is amazing how people allow demonstrations and marches to be totally controlled by the police. In Glasgow they always start them on a Saturday in a quiet part of town, office buildings, nobody's there. It is crazy, they've allowed the agenda to be set about the nature of their protest. In Britain most of the organizers of these things are all part of the official Labour movement anyway. They deal with the police all the time, they negotiate with the system. It is just a total contradiction.

JLR: We were *confronting* the system, quite deliberately and clearly. I had to go to the House of Commons because of what happened. They did nothing about it. We saw them the day before the demonstration and they said "Why do you not stop at the House of Commons sitting that day, to show how you felt about those people who were killed." The MPs we spoke to then put on an Early Day Motion, about what had happened at New Cross.

JK: It may be quite important to say here that with the New Cross Massacre thirteen black teenagers were murdered and no one has been charged with this thing, nobody. People just don't know that.

JLR: We could benefit from our experience. Michael Mansfield and Ian Macdonald, other lawyers, were involved in that case and we were handling most of the major cases of that kind at that particular stage, dealing with those major cases ourselves.

What had happened was that the police were trying to pin the event on some youngsters who were at the party. Because of that we were able to prepare ourselves for the Inquest. Because of our experience in fighting all those cases prior to 1981 we knew how the police handled those cases in court and at Inquests. It is the police who decide what is the evidence before calling an Inquest. We had to prepare ourselves and get collecting the evidence ourselves. We collected evidence from people who were themselves involved at that party. We had a lot of evidence to give to our lawyers. So they were not relying on the police, even in the evidence, and at the Inquest they could question the police.

The police were rotten throughout all that business. The Coroner behaved abominably. The whole press saw it. Because of the kind of influence we had we got the Inquest held in the Chamber of the G.L.C. It lasted for thirteen days.

So that evidence that they were trying to pin on those boys - this is what they had done in other cases, the Guilford 4 and so on - they failed in doing that. They spent about £250,000 doing that. They had about fifty policemen doing that. Having done it, saying that 'These are the boys who did it,' they couldn't come back now and say who else did it. When we went to court again about this particular matter they admitted they'd been wrong trying to pin it on the boys. But they had no further evidence to apply as to who else may have done it. They never pursued it. But what they were not able to do is what they had done in the case of the Guilford 4 and others, to pin it on those boys. They failed to do that.

JK: Thinking again about these fights against racist violence, the brutalities. What in effect the campaigning group was doing was of course police-work, the work of the police. And they also have to go

and get the evidence because it is already been decided by the police what the crime is, and the first thing they always say is "It wasn't racist." Thinking again about that way of confrontation, where it becomes a genuine protest, the other thing is you have to break the law. In the sense if it's serious, any campaign, if you are going to do it properly, because it is always in their power to do you for subjudice, or hold that up to you.

JLR: I had some legal training in Trinidad. I had come here to study law but I abandoned it within the first year. Nevertheless I knew a lot about law. So here I knew what you had to do to present statements about your case and not break the *sub judice* rule. Darcus (Howe) knew. He'd trained in law as well. We were also dealing with most able, brilliant and sympathetic lawyers. Most lawyers whom you deal with in these matters want to control the case themselves, and we knew much more about these particular matters than they did. We also knew exactly the line of defence you've got to take in the cases, and we won most of them.

So coming to that inquest in 1981, the New Cross Massacre, we were really much more prepared than any other grouping in British society would have been to handle that Inquest. That is why we were able to defeat the police in their manoeuvres. Because they went all out to show politically, that what this group of people were saying from the beginning was not true, that the people who had done it were the boys themselves at the party. That's the line they were feeding the press at the very beginning. That's how the press reports these matters. The police give them the information and they report it.

But we had a strategy to deal with that. We formed our own Independent Commission to investigate this particular matter. And we also fed information to certain members of the press about what was happening. So it meant that there was a counter to the general police media strategy. We countered it ourselves in the radio, TV and so on. The police did not have as free a sheet as they would normally have had in dealing with a political matter of this kind. The other important factor was that because we understood the Inquest we knew that it was there they would make their stand to publicly denigrate all that had happened: all that we had done; the Black Peoples' Day of Action, the previous demonstration, the campaign we were organising,

and so on. Therefore we knew we had to prepare for that Inquest very carefully to counter their influence, and we did.

They were really encountering a different kind of political process from what they were normally accustomed to, when they walk through a thing - almost without any opposition. Everyone benefited from the experience that we introduced into this way of handling these matters. Because after that all kinds of groupings knew how to handle these matters. We made our way, our method of dealing with these matters, as widely understood as possible. People were ringing us from Bradford, Manchester, Birmingham - all over the country. And we'd go and help them to organize their cases. We got involved in teaching them how to do it. That's another aspect of creativity that people do not really take as creativity. It is creativity.

JK: Again, our system is designed to do the opposite. it is designed that you do not do that, that you give it to this guy who gets paid £50,000 a year, and he goes and whatever, talks your politics for you.

JLR: It was very much part of what we understood to be a popular movement, and what it has to do. It teaches people how to organize themselves so they become part of their own independent, autonomous organization, for taking on these matters. After a time I do not have to go there at all, they know it and see it through themselves.

JK: It is the opposite of a vanguard in that sense.

JLR That's right. They understand what they will do themselves and they will do it. What happens with that experience, with all the ultra-leftist organizations like SWP, where we're making something they're not accustomed to make...

JK: They can not cope with it.

JLR: No they cannot cope with it. They couldn't cope with us during that New Cross Massacre campaign, or any of the major campaigns. For us the courts were also an area of political struggle . . .

(1993)