

**The GLC Story Oral History Project**

**Interviewee: Ansel Wong**

**Interviewer: Zahra Dalilah**

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**Location: Goldsmiths University, London**

**Z: Could you describe your entrance into politics, when you became politicised when you were younger? What's your background?**

**A: I think my country of birth was Trinidad and Tobago and my political awareness grew out of the politics of the country, leading towards independence. So it was based and rooted within an anti-colonial dialectic. So that growing up as a young child, you were able to participate in a lot of discourses and discussions that were going around at the time, a drive/that derived from from independence from Britain. So that my political awareness grew out of that dialogue. Listening to politicians listening to analysts, a key mentor in that was Dr Eric Williams author of capitalism and slavery because he spoke very intelligently and movingly about aspects of history putting it in the context of freedom from enslavement, freedom from colonialism and as a young child you grew up in that environment running around listening to some of these things and some of the buzzwords that helped to sort of formulate in your mind a position.**

**So for me, for example when Eric Williams spoke about 'massa day done' which is the dominance of the master, the dominance of the plantation owner is finished, something like that resonated in your mind as a child massa day done and that remained and resonated with me very clearly. And the other one was when we gain independence, he said, we are talking about mother Trinidad and Tobago not mother india not mother Africa. So immediately even though our heritage, our roots were from Africa and India, where we are now in that country, that's our mother, that's our roots, that's our heritage.**

**Z: Thank you and could you talk about the journey from Trinidad and Tobago to finding yourself in the UK and your background in terms of studying where you lived, where you grew up?**

**A: Well most people primary and secondary education you undertook was in the colonies at the time or the independent nations. Our education system was geared toward tertiary education, either in the country, er, the mother country i.e. the United Kingdom or you would go abroad either to Canada or the States as a part of a scholarship program or a different kind of program. So natural progression, educational progression, was to a UK university, not a red brick university but it had to be a major university. And we had a system of examination leading us to what is called a scholarship exam so that that scholarship exam entitled you to Oxbridge. And everyone competed in the whole island, competed for that one or two places to Oxbridge and if you didn't get that, you were considered a failure. So my progression was to try something, and I came fourth in the overall scholarship papers so I didn't get into Oxbridge so I had no alternative but to look at an alternative red brick. Yeah, and I got into Hull to read English and American Studies because English was my particular subject which was a big disappointment to my family, a big disappointment to everybody, going leaving Trinidad all the way to go to a flipping red brick university called Hull in Yorkshire [laughing] nobody knew where it is or what it is about. Nevertheless, you're moving away from your country to migrate there.**

**At the same time my family had migrated as a result of the pull factors of economy and advancement. So there were push and pull factors moving people from one part of the Caribbean to the next or from West Africa to the next. I was pushed in terms of the educational input and progression. The rest of my family was pulled because they needed labour to oil the British economy. So both generations, both constituencies coalesce in London. So my sisters and so my**

brothers came over for those reasons and I came over for other reasons. So from that, within that kind of dialectic within those dimensions there were little tensions as well. There were also tensions who those who didn't choose to go to the United Kingdom, but chose to go to the Canada and the USA. But the fact that what happened, the ones who went to Canada, the ones who went to the UK, in terms of successes, financial successes, and academic successes were very different from what happened in the UK.

Within Trinidad and Tobago a degree from the UK automatically entitled you to certain benefits. A degree from USA or Canada even if it's from Harvard or even if it's from any of the Ivy League universities, still didn't match a red brick university in the UK. So there was a value system in those sort of movement, so those were some of the factors that pushed me into there, and placed us in a particular position in United Kingdom society. So I arrived in Hull, in 1965, [to] go straight to Hull University in Yorkshire, studying English and American Studies. There I met other Caribbean people mostly people from Trinidad and Tobago and from other islands and from other colonies of Britain and other countries. And that in itself was an interesting experience because we came in as black students, within UK society, there were certain notions, certain expectations, certain stereotypes that they had of us. And I think that is best illustrated by the fact that the British Council, in this... UK were looking after the welfare of us as foreign students, students from the commonwealth, and their notion of what we need to do to integrate into British society was very much based on these kind of stereotypical, kind of racist perceptions of us. So for example, part of our induction at university, was to show us how to flush a toilet, part of the induction was to show us how to use a knife and fork; because there was a perception that we didn't know how to do these things.

As Trinidadians we found that really laughable and we did it and we laughed at it among ourselves and talked among ourselves about how stupid it is; but we still went through the process. Laughing to ourselves and afterwards, how ignorant these people are. That was the kind of environment at university level that you had to deal with in terms of those perceptions. Obviously there were other perceptions, that we were very good at cricket or that we were very good at playing music. And that in a sense also was true to a certain extent. So for example, in terms of cricket, we all played cricket we all knew how to play cricket, but we never joined the university teams, this was the SU, because we just didn't have that, I don't know, discipline or whatever it was, to buy whites, to buy nets, things and so on. But when the university asked us to play we had a team, a British Council team, and we played the university's second team and beat them badly, because we had fast bowlers, and people bowling in their normal shoes, all sorts of things, and wearing all sorts of colours but for us it was a fun game. But the university took it very seriously and they were defeated and they felt we were not being loyal because we had these skills and yet we weren't willing to participate and represent the university. But for us cricket was a fun game, you do it in your own time, and we enjoyed that. So that put us in conflict in a sense with the university, that reinforced our separateness from the university itself that was also codified by the fact that we were black or the fact that we were from different countries.

Out of that I got involved in radical politics we had the radical student alliance the rsa was the left wing of student politics, the nutters as they said in terms of radicalism and Marxism I naturally progressed towards that, my friends were also involved in that. It was around May 65-67 or thereabouts were there were a lot of things happening in Paris and the Vietnam war and so on. So we were very heavily involved in activism and political action within the university and within Hull as

a city. As black student we became part and parcel of us. We had our own organisations, we had the Caribbean society, that was a basis that gives us an opportunity just to feel at home with our culture and so on. And it was open to everybody so the opportunity for people to enjoy themselves in a Caribbean milieu, the chance to experience something from that aspect. It was good in Hull because we had a professor who was an expert in Caribbean literature so there was always a predisposition towards welcoming anything that was Caribbean, so that would enable us to happen. But the activism continued, we did a lot of work, we twinned with Hai Phong in Vietnam we raised money to buy ambulances and send them to Vietnam for the Vietcong. Like Paris when Paris erupted we too erupted, took over the university, expelled all the senate and everybody and elected a new senate of five students who became the senators of the university, I was one of the five, elected as senator. Then we negotiated to have a parallel structure in terms of the management of the university, the students become represented on the senate, and the five of us together with the university senate become the governing body for the university. So that radicalism, that approach toward revolution and what we thought was left wing manifested itself around that whole period when the Vietnam War was kind of generating a lot of support among students.

And then coming down from university to London during the break time whether it was a summer break or mid-term break, it was very easy for us to drive down to London and join the urban elite in London, all the other London students, who had a much more... we looked up to actually because London was a kind of centre. We did our thing in Hull, we did our thing in Leeds, we linked up in the north but when you get down to London it was a different thing altogether because for the first time you're engaging with the community not as university students, it was a community of people, of ordinary people and that was quite an eye opener. That meant to say that we didn't see ourselves as a kind of elite as academics, university graduates and so on. We were engaging very much with that second and third generation young black community. The best example of that was around the West Indian students centre in Earl's Court. That was the central communal space for all Caribbean students, paid for by the Caribbean government. So each government contributed to maintain this building, it was a very big in Earl's Court. And there you would go there was a library there was a dinner, a three course dinner in 16p, there was a bar. This was in 1965-68 and 69, 70 and so on. But it was an opportunity to do that, it was a place you could go and sit down, you can read books, newspapers from the Caribbean was there, you have a library where you could go and study, a quiet study, you had a billiards room, you had showers and everything. It was a nice little student centre. Next door to it was the West African student centre where the West African students were involved, so there was this kind of student orientated politics. At the same time, bubbling over that was what was happening in the black communities across London. And those people were agitating to get involved in what they see as this prestigious place, middle class students from the Caribbean enjoying themselves and all of the facilities and they, not getting the opportunity to do so.

Our politics, which was of a populist nature wanted us to bring these young people in and bring the community in so that the community would engage with students. I was involved with the union of West Indian students which is the West Indian Students Union. The Union of West Indian Students was a national, international thing body across the whole world and West Indians Students Union was the UK branch. Both branches myself and Tony Martin became Professor Tony Martin who is one of the foremost scholars on Marcus Garvey, we both managed and ran those two organisations. So we developed quite a lot of work within that centre to politicise the young people and begin to address the issues of black people in the United Kingdom, black people in London. Which before, as students

we weren't particularly au fait with because we were looking at global issues across the world not true what was happening locally. And that is where activism came out, a lot of things happened in that centre, the centre became a focal of political activity. To such an extent that the government threatened to cut off funding if we don't stop and introduce measures to stop the community coming in. And that battle went on until in the end the government, all of the Caribbean governments because they all were contributing, British Caribbean governments, at different levels, like the United Nations, they all have a percentage they will contribute and they all decided that when Pms came, when ministers came on tours and visits, or whatever it is they would come to address the students but while they came to address the students there would be very discordant elements within there, that one carrying on. It was a place where radicals came. So after Tommy lee and all of those people who did a black power salute at the Olympics, when they passed through London they came there and addressed the students. We invited them to come and address the students. That was seen as not the remit of this centre, we shouldn't be engaging those sort of politics and so on. Michael X would come and visit the centre, all the radical movements would be there, the Caribbean artists movements, would have meetings there regularly. And these are Caribbean writers, Andrew Sorkey, Eddie Braithwait, John la Rose everybody coming to London and meeting as Caribbean writers in exile, as writers. So all this was a hub of political activity and I was chairman of the house committee, I ran that centre, and also the vice chair of the union of west indian students unions across the world. So I became very much meshed into that.

And then we started to do things also of a radical nature. Two examples, one was the creation of a black supplementary school and we called it the CLR James supplementary school. CLR James agreed, he wrote to me, I asked him and he said yes, call it by my name. And we set up that school to teach English basic skills, black politics and culture and so on for the young people. And the second one was an arts group called the black arts workshop. And the idea was to look at black art, black performance, black theatre. At that time, in America, people like Amir Baraka, Leroy Jones and Essence magazine all of those radical... the black aesthetic was being promoted by Ed Bullins and others like him. We embraced all of that, the black is beautiful movement. That workshop was an opportunity for people who were creative, poets, writers, dancers, everybody coming together as young first gen and second generation black people, and opportunity to perform their art and their craft.

Linked to that also a lot of groups at the same time, the black united and freedom party in London, new cross, around here. The facembas which was another theatre performing group black theatre group, and we were the two main proponents of black art. Black arts workshop and the facembas sometimes we'd join together and put on shows, all within this idea of revolution and taking the art and looking at art in a different perspective, and creating something we then called a black aesthetic. So yes, black is beautiful, and therefore the beauty is determined not by European characteristics, European norms or metaphors or anything like that. We are creating our own idea of what it is that we can call beautiful, what it is that we can call excellent, that appeals and relates to our culture. Sorry I'm going on...

[microphone changes position]

Z: What was your career progression after university?

A: Left university in 1968, I then came down to London. I decided that because again my family had been settled in, the ones who went to Canada, ones that went to the USA and ones who remained in the UK. There was no real wish then to return, which would have been the original idea: come to

university, do your degree and teach at whatever it was. But I decided then to stay on, do a postgraduate certificate in education, which at the time was called education in tropical areas. It was just a pseudonym for teaching English as a second language which, that was the words used later on! But in those days, in the 1960s, 69-70, they decided on this notion of 'education in tropical areas'. And it's the same thing like second language teaching. I did that and I got my post graduate certificate in education, did a teaching practice at Sydenham Girls School in Forest Hill and decided well, look, this is it. I was offered a post at Sydenham and decided to take it. So therefore in one fell swoop, my life, then really said, this is it, I'm grounded here in the United Kingdom, I'm grounded here in London. And my career was within that decision.

So I then started to get involved in other things and other activities, developing the black arts workshop as I referred to earlier and also involving in a political organisation called the black liberation front which was one of few black organisations like the Panthers, the Black Panthers, the Black Liberation Front and the Black United and Freedom party and we all were developing approaches that were trying to introduce programs of resistance, programs of rebellion, that kind of thing. And campaigning against certain things, campaigning against the SUS laws, campaigning against police brutality, campaigning against inability to enter into nightclubs and so on. Wherever there were opportunities we would certainly coalesce a community and join that particular campaign. Whether it's the mangrove restaurant, whether it's over 4 people arrested and beaten up by the police at Oval station or whether it's around direct activism of certain individuals, say for example around the siege, the Spaghetti House siege. Spaghetti House in Knightsbridge is a Spaghetti House and some of our young people went in there to rob it. And it went wrong and they took hostages and they belonged to our organisation, the Black Liberation Front, at least two of them belong to the organisation, one was a criminal and that again placed us into direct limelight. Because in some instances we'd been very romantic about revolution very romantic about what we wanted to achieve and not realising what is the real implications of what we were saying and what would happen in terms of bringing the radical approach towards religion. So for me I was at university, I struggled with liberation theology in terms of my faith as a catholic, coming to this country as a Jesuit priest, therefore having difficulties accepting the dogma of Catholicism. But then being attracted by the liberation theologians of latin America who saw religion in a different matter. Or Pablo Friere in terms of his ideas about education. So that education is not necessarily a bad thing in concept, it's a different concept of how you acquire knowledge and acquire experiences. So all of these things begin to influence my thing, my thoughts and because you dabbled with it as well as the personal struggles you went through, because my parents would be very upset that I suddenly lost my faith and [was] no longer going to the church, but that was the reality. I came here and I struggled, I went in to live in the chaplaincy to try and redeem my faith to try and see what else I could do. I couldn't, there's no way, my mother had to eventually accept that that's the way I am. So this change continued, all the kind of influences coming onto you as you moving and getting involved, then there's the political aspect of it, all the political struggles going around, campaigns around things that were happening in the community in London. Then there were the issues around trying to organise yourself into an organisation replicated along the lines of the American black power movement as well and developing self help initiatives which led to development and creation of Ujamaa/Eugima housing association which we developed which was the largest black housing association in the UK.

And we started very simply. Around squatting and capturing, what we called capturing properties. So

you would see, look around your communities and if you see an empty property, nobody's there, you break in, you tidy it up, you paint, you fixed it, you bring the young people who were getting more and more, there was more and more homelessness and they would stay there for a month, two month, three, a year and then you move them on. So there's lots of properties in London that were free. So we have a van and we drive around and we have people who are plumbers people who are painters people who could do different things so we'd break into those buildings and wait until they take us to court or until the police come and turf us out. So it was very much like a squatting movement at the time. So what we concentrated on was black young people, because increasingly we were having homelessness and as they were growing up, they were in conflict with their parents. Their parents felt 'right, you can't behave like you were doing: out'. They chucked them out.

[hits his microphone] Sorry.

And then there was the question about our girls getting pregnant and increasingly becoming pregnant and becoming... having single parenthood, nowhere to go. We had to find solutions to these because this was our community. You can't take a moral attitude towards it: 'don't get pregnant'. Yes you can say something, yes, don't... protect yourself, sex protection, sex protection. But if you get pregnant we're gonna find a way of dealing with it. So we established hostels for our girls, young girls who were either getting pregnant or were chucked out, who weren't getting pregnant but we had to do that. So I was a warden at one of those hostels in Ladbroke Grove. And we had about 50 rooms and each girl would be in one room. My wife had that responsibility to look after them, to nurture them, to show them... basically, don't get pregnant. [laughing] that was our message. AND they had a subsidised rent in there. And the idea was to then move them from there into permanent accommodation. So programs like that were part of our educational strategy to deal with the black presence in this country. So we established operation headstart which is a program to build on that so we had a book shop, headstart books and crafts in West Green Road in Tottenham, Seven Sisters. And that provided some of the entrepreneurial resources that we needed to carry out our projects. So we did all of that yeah, and I played a pivotal role in developing with others some of these things. So, teaching at the same time, I stayed teaching at mostly girls schools because that was my main concern because what I was seeing among our young girls was very troubling and very worrying and we wanted to tackle that, so took that choice. Plus I found it easier to teach girls and to get that kind of respect and be able to drive them and create the kind of motivation that they needed for education, for their educational success. And that was very powerful.

Z: So the work you did on the side was the Black Liberation Front and other than that you were working as a teacher.

A: As a teacher, yes.

Z: Okay and how did you come from being an English teacher to working with the GLC

A: Right, from an English teacher working at Sydenham I soon realised that I wasn't able to directly engage the girls because I was one of the few teachers that had a degree in English and therefore they were putting me to teach at the highers, there was streaming, at the higher streams, O level, A level and so on. And all the other girls that I wanted to teach were the lower streams and I wasn't accessing them. I decided then to get involved by providing them opportunities for them to meet so

lunchtime, I will collect their money, 18p whatever it is, we collect their money, send two of them down to Brixton market to buy food, they bring it back, they cook and we eat, we have lunch. So instead of having a school lunch so we had that kind of opportunity, it's a Caribbean club. But then they felt it had to be widened, it should be all girls. So we call it the fourth world club, women as a fourth world, an opportunity to create that kind of things.

So I decided I can move out of that and when I was offered the opportunity to develop a community education project in Brixton, I decided to do that and there is where I set up the Affaway school which was the first black supplementary school that was funded by the Inner London Education Authority and that school again was a full time school for young people who were truanting in the head or truanting with the feet in the education system. I did outreach work with those local schools in Lambeth Norwood Girls, Dick Shepherd, Wilson Manor, I did some work with Tulse Hill Boys and so we worked very much around that and therefore the opportunity existed for a positive intervention in the lives of these young people because you were giving them some positive opportunity to deal with all this underachievement and poor self images.

So from there I was rooted in social engineering, social work to make sure these things happen. So it was a natural progression from there into local authority work and social work. 'Cause from there I went and found myself into the development in Elimu Community School, what we call a communiversity, linking up school and university and Elimu is swahili for knowledge or education and the idea is you provide community knowledge and community education for people who were there.

Ken Livingstone became mayor of London and he decided to recruit a team around him for his own agenda and I was encouraged to become part of that team. He set up an ethnic minority's unit within the Greater London Council, headed up Herman Oosely, who is now Lord Oosely and Herman asked me to come and be his deputy and that's how I went into the Greater London Council because we had an agenda, we had to support Ken with his left-wing agenda and deliver it. Because the problem he had was to deal with all the bureaucrats and officers in the GLC who are careerists. We came in as political activists we came in on the basis that we were gonna change this organisation because we are subscribing to the agenda Ken has brought in. We were put in there for that purpose.

So for the first time I had a status as a very senior officer at one of the top levels within Greater London and had had very little experience of senior management at that time but very clear in my head what my politics were in terms of community engagement, community empowerment and in terms of using the resources right across London.

Z: Sorry, what year are we in?

A: This was erm, oh God, I finished 68/72, it's around the late 70s, yes. 80s, 1980s.

Z: Okay so just to kind of get a sense of the political atmosphere at the time; so you had Margaret Thatcher elected in 79 and you had the GLC abolished a couple of years after that. So what was kind of your memory of those key events, when Thatcher got elected, when Ken came in...



A: Well, once Ken came into power, as I said, we were brought in to fit in with his agenda. And we just started to make programs to make changes within local government. For example we tackled the fire brigade, as a uniform service, because we had responsibility for that, for the fire bridge. So that... there weren't any black firefighters so we decided that we had to tackle that agenda in terms of ensuring that diversity and equality is incorporated. Part of that struggle was to tackle the issue around selection procedures and testing; what sort of testing they'd use, personality testing and so on which was very much skewed against black people and we looked at that, we got buy in for the other members to change all of that so when a black person applied there was this opportunity for that black person to be as successful as anybody because the test that you were asked to do didn't discriminate against you. So there were things like that, there were things around economic development we wanted to look at, how we empower through venture funding and different aspects of economic development, access to buildings and so on.

Z: What's venture funding?

A: Start up funds, yes, to enable a business to use start up funds to start their own business. Around the issues around race because there was a ethnic minorities unit there was a women's unit, there was a police unit and these were the three main areas. Obviously there was economic development, arts, so on. These were the three main political units who were there to try and force that agenda working in partnership. Working in partnership with economic development, working in partnership with the arts with responsibility for Southbank and the programming for the Southbank for example where black people and black arts weren't given the opportunities to use this prestigious venues. So us as the ethnic minorities council had a remit right across the GLC to make sure that elements of their delivery, of their services, didn't discriminate against black people or did not in fact fail to represent those cultures; and plus the fact that we develop our own programs.

SO we would have concerts we would have events and we have commemorations so we introduce this anti-racist year which would be a celebration. We had the money to do that because we used local authority um, Section 137 I think it was, of local government act which enabled us to have a penny out of whatever it was to generate the funding for those kind of projects. And that led to us launching this anti-racist year for the whole of greater London, we're talking about every borough, 32 boroughs, London boroughs all embracing and participating in that. So immediately, the agenda for race, race became high on the agenda because it was being taken at that level by Ken Livingstone and the GLC.

Out of that came African Jubilee Year, the commemoration of the organisation of african unity, the celebration of emancipation and so on and out of that came black history month because it was part and parcel of that.

So it was initiatives over the years that was building up be able to say to Londoners this has to be a multiracial, multicultural, multiethnic society, and therefore as leaders at that level we are going to be creating programs that reflect that multiethnicity and multiculturalism.

Z: And before Ken Livingstone, what was the agenda of the GLC?

A: I think before then, I wasn't involved as an employee, I was involved as an outsider. My

involvement as an employee came when Ken got elected and he brought us in so I was new to the GLC as an officer, as an employee. Prior to that it was very much an echelon of white power at the top end of the scale because you had Greater London Council and then you had the local authorities and then you had the Inner London Education Authority at each of these there were troubles going on with the community. So with the ILEA there were elements in terms of issues around achievement in terms of underachievement and identify . So they developed in their own way a kind of multiethnic inspectorate. Which included again people like myself, not me personally but people like myself at that level who were teachers who would be given the opportunity become inspectors and would drive the agenda for race, class in the Inner London Education Authority.

So from the ILEA there was that things happening but within the GLC there was very little evidence of any change before Ken Livingston. There was an idea that you're delivering services and the delivery of these services was efficient and we didn't need to take into account any needs or special needs in terms of ethnicity or race. Perhaps in terms of class but not in terms of race for communities. So there was a kind of colourblind approach towards the delivery of services and it was when Ken came in and made a race, ethnicity, disability, gender and economic status key indicators that would influence policy development and programs, then all of that changed.

Z: Where there any other major political events in the leadup to Ken Livingstone's takeover that marked the political atmosphere at the time?

A: Well there was the ongoing issues around SUSS, SUSS laws, vagrancy law. The police arresting people on suspicion of being a footpad or things.

Z: What's a footpad?

A: Someone who steals, what the phrase called, immigrant footpad, that was muggers. [surprise, laughter]. A footpad in the old english parlance is someone who steals from you and run away. SO there was this idea that a lot the mugging and the street crime was generated by black young people. There was that issue and there for any black person is susceptible to being stopped and searched by the police because of that basic suspicion and that meant it brought young people directly into contact with the police and there were high levels of arrests and so on.

Issues around what was happening in our schools where issues around poor self image, issues around educational , labelled educationally sub-normal, ESN, and then placed into special schools. There were issues around, for us as black parents, for my generation and the generation before me who saw special education as special not negative because from the Caribbean from Africa, west africa, if you're given something special , it's special and it's different, better but within the English context special education meant that you were separate because you were not within the norm.

So educationally sub normal and special schools became the dumping ground for black students. That was a battle that had been waged. Organisations had been formed [coughs] black teachers, black teachers were coming together as one body. There was a growth in the development of black studies particularly in primary schools. There was a Teachers Against Racism (TAR) which was an asian body fighting for that multiculturalism . And it was another organisation, national... NAME... National Association for Multiethnic Education. Again radical teachers, black teachers coming

together. So again there was organising at fractured points in the society where people took it into their hands to bring people of like mind together to campaign for change, to initiate change or to show what alternatives may exist. SO all of that was happening outside the GLC but little change, apart from the ILEA, there was very little change at that institutional level .

Z: So, you mentioned a few things you did while you were at the GLC, what were your proudest moments of that time?

A: Good question. I think... what I remember very distinctly was abolition. Because we knew abolition was coming. We were in county hall and just just across the road in the houses of parliament they were debating things. And during that period of debate when the bill was going through there was a hive of activity. And we were planning strategising on the basis of what was happening in parliament. It meant immediate action and for me it was direct engagement in community politics. So for example we would have people on motorbikes ready to move based on whatever is happening in parliament. So if there was a particular clause it meant that we had to shift resources into new organisations, creating these organisations in order to shift money there because once we're gone we wanted them to be able to continue to exist and to fight thatcher and it meant creating organisations that would be the receipt of this money and it meant people on bikes going down to companies' house and filing companies, us as officers, senior officers, signing documents as directors of this company, directors of that company so we can shift. So there was that kind of buzz of activity that was really really good; and it was a heightened buzz. And the opportunity to say okay we've got one year we've got six months, let's see what we can do, what are the legacies we can leave behind?

One of the legacies obviously was a successor authority to create successor authorities because once we got abolished we could only depend on the labour controlled authorities, we can't control the conservative controlled.... So therefore we had to think, what can be achieved by keeping some of these structures. In the end, us as staff were transferred onto what is called successor authorities. So like the London Borough of Camden became the lead borough for these successor authorities ,we were transferred onto the payroll because by that time we had shifted money onto Camden to pay for our salaries and we began to work for Camden and gradually dissipated throughout labour controlled boroughs. So that for me, I felt that kind of excitement of creating something.

Kind of concurrent with that came the biggest sense of disappointment in what we didn't leave behind which we could have left behind and that was property. As community organisations we didn't own any property we couldn't allow organisations to buy property and own the freehold they could only rent it. So that meant even though we were helping organisations to develop, in the end they didn't own anything and I felt we could have found a way of transferring ownership so that when the GLC died, that community organisation could continue to exist because they had a building, they had a church, they had a gurdwara, they had a community centre, they had a youth centre, that they owned that was theirs, we weren't able to do that.

Z: And how long were you at the GLC in total ?

A: I think... I can't remember the number of years but I was there from Ken's coming into power to abolition, the first year he came into power, yes, yeah.

**Z: And as, just talking about the GLC a bit more as an institution could you describe how... what the remit of the Greater London Council was?**

**A: Well the remit was the government for London clearly, with certain limitations because central government still continued you know to make taxes, set government and so on. But the government for London within its limitations as a second tier of government obviously they can't raise their own taxes, they can't raise their own funds and depend on money from central government. And within those limitations they had to develop policies and practices that would deliver for Londoners . It meant also delivering across all political spectrums because not all London authorities, local authorities were labour, not all were conservative it was a mixture. Therefore you had to work together to bring about understanding and support for those projects that would have widespread support otherwise you wouldn't get it through to various committees it wouldn;t become policy funding would not be allocated and then you back to square one.**

**So it was a bureaucratic environment, a bureaucratic institution dependent very much on the allocation of resources from central government.**

**Z: And how did that interplay play out between the sort of party politics and the local politics?**

**A: Well, I mean, I think different elements were very dependent on which party was in power, who held sway at county hall. Like in housing, because housing was a very important feature so with the opportunity for a particular borough to benefit from social housing, benefit from grants for that to happen was very much dependent on who was in overall control of the Greater London Council . so those are some areas and then there's the management spaces parks and so on and there was also specific initiatives where you need to a particular part of London. What in theory there was this idea of a strategic overview of the whole area in terms of physical geography so you look across London, the idea of having a strategic authority you look at it as just London not the 32 boroughs. So when you're looking at open spaces you're looking at parks you're looking at housing, you're taking that overall picture but that overall picture had to be mediated by people who had different allegiances people who had different political positions, people who had different agendas . And it is the discussion and debate in county hall around those, in negotiating and mediation in terms of the allocation of resources and quid pro co of that discussions. So it's like a mini-parliament, things happened, there was ministers responsible for that, chief officers, heads of departments and at the top of that there was the director general who had the ultimate power in terms of day to day management. Of course the leader of the council is the leader of the politicians and then the DG director general is the one that delivers.**

**Z: So in terms of decision making how did that work?**

**A: There was the council which was of all of the members, then within that there are committees. There's finance and general purposes, there's architecture and again, different delivery and different services so it will be the art, architecture, housing economic development and with Ken he brought in these units under the director general's responsibility in terms of equality which is gender, police and so on. So each committee had responsibility and had a budget for producing whatever was the manifesto commitment of that governing, the main party who was in power. And of course that has**

to be put against the opposition who would fight against that if they think it isn't in the interest of all Londoners. It was always trying to find a median way without upsetting too many people because otherwise you're not going to get it through unless you had a very good majority in place which would enable you that whatever you put to that committee would get through because you had a whip who would create the majority decision so again it's a replication of parliament.

Z: Okay so the committees were quite effective then in self-determining and being able to have the power to...?

A: In most instances yes and also in being able to have the opportunity for Londoners to influence that committee by attending meetings so there was always a public gallery where you were able to attend meetings and people could voice your opinion or petition that particular committee with your own views. Either from a local perspective or from a borough wide perspective or just a community of interest perspective.

Z: And what was the relationship like to the civil service at that time?

A: Erm, i'm not sure about that, I never had really any direct engagement with the civil service in terms of that, except where we may have overstepped our mark and people would be vigilant in reminding us what we are doing because all the time when i served we were stretching the boundaries. We would say to the finance officer don't tell me i can't do it, tell me how to do it. So we would want to do something and the finance person would say well you don't have the power to do this, you can only do this with section whatever it is of the local government act or you could only do this with section... I said "I don't need to know any of that, tell me which section I need to use to do it". Because then each report that goes to committee has what's called a concurrence: a report by legal a report by finance to say these are the legal implications of what you're wanting to do, these are the financial implications of what you're... have we got the money to do it? Or can we use GLC money to do it? Or are you in breach of the law? Are you in breach of regulations? And then those two things are the most important things pre-Ken. After Ken we introduced a third element: an equality consideration. Not only whether you can do it legally, not only whether you can do it in terms of resources but what are the implications on equality and diversity so each report had to have a concurrence from us as ethnic minorities unit. So legal, resourcing, budget financing, equality.

Z: So in terms of the GLC as a workplace itself, was the ethnic minorities unit the main point of upholding equality in the workplace and how was that...?

A: Well, that was the intent, when you create a structure like that you have a unit outside everything acting as a policeman. But we didn't see ourselves as that because the idea behind it is then you could never police a bureaucracy that large. It is just physically impossible, you need to have a vast array of staff with each attached. So there were different ways of dealing with it, do you have what is called advisors within each department reporting to the ethnic minorities unit or do you have, what we started off with is that every report had to come to us. For looking at, to see if it's in breach. Physically, you soon became overwhelmed, there's no way you can go through any report, read all those reports, make judgements about all of them. So the point is you have to make sure that the people within those departments themselves are committed to equality and anti-racism. And themselves will begin to self monitor the extent to which they as a department do that. We could

provide support, we could provide assistance, we could provide nudging, we could provide political might if they want we could get certain things done and there's restrictions, we could go to the leader or deputy leader and say this is what this department require. So our role was as facilitators as well as policing. Less policing because to be honest with you, there's no way we had the resources to police effectively. So we had to set by example, look at policies and strategies and set by example in terms of equality and diversity. And individual departments would deliver in-keeping with those strategies.

Z: So you mentioned already a few of the festivals and the celebrations and that you kind of led on the creation of a lot of them. What was the impact that you saw of these both within the institution and across the city?

A: Well, the whole idea of promoting black art and black culture and promoting the multicultural nature of London is to encourage that to happen to give a platform, sometimes free and open to any community to exhibit their art. So we funded organisations to do that, to put on these programs, as well as we did our programs ourselves in the jubilee gardens or in one of the GLC parks and recreational areas. So we will invite the artists to come and perform or will give a grant to people to help them to have a local festival or a local event by branding it as a GLC event by giving them the money to do that, you're ensuring that there's a wide representation of the arts and culture of London and we did that quite effectively. Some of the things we did prestigious because we had responsibility for the Southbank centre with all the arts the festival hall and so on. We would work with the managers of there and say, you need to look at your programming, the extent to which your programming for concerts and so on are reflecting the full range of diverse cultures in London and that was a very effective role so that the head of the arts department, we had an arts officer within our unit, who would work very closely with the head of that arts department to make sure that that diversity is recognised in their programming, their employment and in their leadership. So we had a number of good festivals, we invited Stevie Wonder, he performed as part of the African Jubilee Year, a number of very big festivals with Tanya Maria with Nina Simone with all the sort of black artists and ballet... ballet afrique, yeah, and so on yeah. So we, we set the example by inviting these people and working with the community toward these so one of my particular aspect was promoting art and culture of people of indian descent from the caribbean in the caribbean communities so we brought over artists that are representing that; the national indian orchestra of Trinidad and Tobago and Mongol Patisa who is a famous sitarist, yes, played the sitar with free concerts throughout London that people were able to come and access and listen to the music either in the park or in a town hall.

Z: You've als touched on abolition a little bit but if you could expand a little bit more about kind of those last months and the last, even up to the last night and what your reaction was to abolition at that time.

A: Well once we accepted that we going to to be abolished, once we knew that that's Thatcher's agenda and there's no way we were able, not going to be abolished, you had to begin to strategise and to develop. At one level, at the personal level, there's the question of people who are workers. You've got to look after their welfare because they were being made redundant, once they get their redundancy that's fine but people who come in and work here because at that time the GLC had trapped in a lot of community activists who felt that they wanted to participate and they came in

with that kind of enthusiasm that energy and suddenly realised well, I'm gonna be out of a job in six months. So as managers we had to start a system to enable people to be redeployed as appropriate or to get the necessary assistance to get employment elsewhere. So we set up systems and consultants and managers and so on to provide that kind of support. So once you felt that people were being dealt with, nobody, well as far as you can see, nobody's gonna suffer the fact that they're gonna be out of a job unless they've taken a decision to, not to work or whatever it is, but you did your best to make sure all your staff would be looked after and had possible employment opportunities. Then you began to look at what you could do in terms of leaving a legacy. And what can you do to make sure that this period of Nirvana or whatever you wanna call it is something that remains positive in people's imagination. And that was when we started to look at alternatives, that's when we started looking at what is the political consequences of looking at post abolition, what shall exist and the creation of successor authorities was developed. So the ethnic minorities unit became the race and equality policy group RAPG, under Camden so Camden was then responsible for doing that. Taking out as many of our employees from the ethnic minorities unit transfer them under the control of Camden paid by Camden council under what is called a tupe agreement affecting the transfer of people because you have certain rights in terms of your transfer and a job here that matches your job more than 60 or 70% you should naturally fill into it without having to go to an interview. So strategies like that we introduced and to make sure that those people continued to exist and the agenda and the politics of Greater London Council continues in that successor authority. So it was called London's strategic policy unit, LSPU and that was the main strategic successor authority of the GLC. Nine local authorities, labour controlled authorities contributed to the money for that plus the money that we transferred on. And under that LSPU banner became these specialist units, the women's unit, the race unit, police unit, economic development.

Z: And then what was it like that day, that last day of the GLC?

A: I don't even know if I can remember that last day [laughing] it must have been quite an incredible day because we were always celebrating things. And as a staff we gelled, in adversity we really got closer to each other and supported each other, and af-, for me what I do remember, is that after work, just like after work, it continued like everyone was still at work. This camaraderie that existed around people because you know we were struggling and developing things that we all believed in and wanted to do so that created bond for people to liaise with outside and I know that in our unit, up until this day we still meet from time to time, we go out to have a meal, finance for example or housing, they still meet. GLC groups of people on the different departments still meet all over London.

Z: And was there an overall community that was created by the GLC with activists or officers and employees?

A: Certainly among the minority units, race, police and so on. We all related to each other, especially if there were black people employees and all that. We had a good relationship with the women's unit because race and women were the two major dynamic there and between us we had policy officers for refugees and gypsies and travellers and so on. So all of that enabled us to be fully representative of all the constituencies in the society and therefore we could relate to each other very very positively. Yes, there were conflicts, there were issues around who would get the biggest

share of the cake, is gender more important than race, is race more important than class and that sort of thing. You had those discussions, you had those approaches, and then because each unit had a different committee head. So our unit was headed by Ken and that was in our favour because the leader headed race because we felt race was most important in terms of the dynamic. The woman's unit was headed by another woman who wasn't the leader, and therefore perhaps was seen as less accessible in getting the resources necessary for the women's unit.

**Z:** Who sticks out in your mind the most from that era, in terms of people that you worked with, what prominent figures?

**A:** Well, I worked very closely with Paul Boateng, who became Lord Boateng and he was very very supportive of us. And then there was Linda Bellos who became our chair of the successor authority after abolition. And she and Narendra Makenji, was a supporter from Harringey, those were the key people who gave us the support to do things and to do things with impunity and to do things knowing that our backs were covered. So Bernard Wiltshire from the Inner London Education Authority also as a part of that authority was enabling us to do things. If you had that kind of political support dotted around the council, with the black officers, that was useful. And then the opportunity because we knew, we brought in this idea of people still linking to the community so people could come in to visit us from the community. County hall, yes, was an imposing building, for security reasons not everyone can come in but people felt that this was a community initiative and people could come in any time and just come into the offices and meet, sit down and chat. And we generated that kind of ambience where people can feel that this is not a local government that's foreboding, we can't access, we can't go in without an appointment, you have to go through all kinds of security checks. There has to be an element of that because it was a public building and so on. But once you got in there the ambience of the unit was very much embracing, inclusive.

**Z:** And what was the relationship like to the other institutions, for example the local councils?

**A:** we worked with the local council in some respects, particularly the labour controlled ones . With the others there was a good relationship, a normal relationship. They accepted the fact that we were officers, some people knew that we are officers with a political agenda. But in the main we were able to lead very closely with the key officers in those neighbouring boroughs so for example in Hackney there would be a race advisor, so that race advisor worked very closely with us. He would come up to our meetings we would go to his meetings we would support each other, we would sit down and strategise. So each of the key elements or key boroughs would have race advisors and those race advisors were natural allies to us in the Greater London Council and were our point of entry to that local authority so that was very useful in enabling us to have a good working relationship with that local authority.

**Z:** And that was in Hackney?

**A:** Yes, Hackney is one example but there were lots of others.

**Z:** And what was the relationship like between the GLC and conservative councils?

**A:** In some instances it was a healthy scepticism about what we can do and we knew the limitations



in terms of trying to deal with them but we always tried to have a very professional approach to that. We knew that there was no way we will get certain concessions or support for particular policies, particular programs but we felt that still we need to work with those local authorities and there were individual members who were very supportive, they didn't agree with everything we did or wanted to do but never the less felt that they could give us support as professionals and I think we enjoyed a good, generally a good, working relationship with those las. I'm trying to think of any one where there was a total absence and I can't think of any local authority where we had any major problems of non-engagement and non-compliance.

**Z:** What about the relationship with broader movements, social movements across the city?

**A:** With political organisations and community organisations some of those who were in receipt of funding obviously had a very positive attitude towards us, there were others who felt their politics was such that they felt we were just window-dressing as black people in there and therefore we weren't really representative of the black community and weren't doing anything of value to the black community in fact we were very much traitors and can't be trusted. So there was that element particularly from the radical black left, yeah. And I, I understand that because I was part of that, when I left the building I was part of that radical black left and [muffles] some of that as well. So I understood that and the relationship was very tetchy with those organisations and they were all very critical of us. But it was important for us to understand where they were coming from and to take that on board but it sometimes hurt when you were told in public that you're a traitor to the black race and you shouldn't be doing certain things. But we believed in what we were doing and we believed, yes, there was an element of papering the cracks, there was an element of just doing things in a showy manner, just pure presentation as opposed to substance and structural change. We knew that, but equality was the message that was getting across, that equality matters, that black peoples were here to stay and therefore you had to deal with us.

**Z:** And do you think that the attitude of the radical black left was limited to that section of people? How did that compare with public perception or community perception?

**A:** I think generally either because we were liking particularly with certain elements of the community but there were lots of support from communities because you've got to acknowledge that for the first time, many of those communities had no access to power, no access to resources and here they found an organisation that was receptive to their needs, receptive to what they have to say so we had a lot of, consultation was an essential element of our work we consulted and we had discussions, we had seminars, we had conferences regularly with all different constituencies so we always invited people to come and tell us what we want in the local authority. So right across the board us and our staff had these meetings and had these presentations and all our programs was involved around that. So we reached out to those communities in a quite structured and deliberate way so from that point of view, the negative comments that came for the radical left was very much to the extreme left. Most people were quite willing to accommodate us, to embrace us if not necessarily fully support us.

**Z:** Just moving on now to talking about the legacy. What do you think the legacy of the GLC was for you personally?

**A:** For me it gave me the opportunity to build on a platform in terms of my own career development and understanding. It gave me an opportunity to understand how political power operates at the highest level it gave me an opportunity to engage with different communities that I wouldn't have been able to engage with if I was just an ordinary person. The insights I gain working with the travellers, the insights I gain working with the Jewish community, the insights I gain working with the gay and lesbian community were valuable insights for me personally as I would not have had the opportunity to do except in a very cursory way with those communities but directly engage with them, meeting with them discussing them, providing opportunities for development and so on enabled me to be a better person, to understand how inclusivity is important and how diversity is important to development. So that was the one thing I felt I gained out of my experience with the GLC.

**Z:** And what about the communities that the GLC engaged with, what do you think the legacy was for them?

**A:** For many it was resources, for many it was money to do things, for many it was an opportunity to get a lease on a building for many it was an entry into political power because some of those people who got involved they became local councillors because they felt that they could see elements of where they could be effective in delivering support. So those were the very positive outcomes for many people who as community representatives or as communities engage with the GLC.

**Z:** What do you think London would look like today if the GLC had continued its work?

**A:** I, if we have a GLC different from what we have presently now which is the Greater London Authority, I think we would have needed to be invested with far more powers. So I think we should have had powers to deal with health and a local NHS. We should have had powers to deal with the aspects of developing London, planning, building on different sites. And I think if the GLC had continued and was supported at central government level there would have been a greater devolving of powers to the GLC. On the other hand it could have been the opposite way, and more powers taken back centrally, and the GLC would have just been a window dressing aspect. But I think the way politics went, where people who'd been wanting to be locally involved in what's happening in their communities, it would have been very difficult for any government not to devolve more powers to its strategic authorities in the way which they've done with Wales and Scotland so London I think would have kind of easily become part of that process.

**Z:** Do you think the GLC could have continued in that way under a conservative government?

**A:** I think the drive towards devolving power was so strong that either government party or all party would find it difficult to stop it. You'd be able to slow it down but in the end it would have to happen, yeah. Purely because, as well, that taking things in centrally and doing everything centrally just goes against every basic principles of unity and participation and engagement, we all know that. If you're gonna get people to be committed, and if you get them to commit they have to feel as part and parcel of the process both in terms of decision and delivery.

**Z:** What was the relationship like with central government?

**A:** Very little, I had to do, in terms of central government except when we met with the odd senior

minister or civil servant in particular departments. But, um, trying to think, very little I can remember of any direct engagement with central government, except around certain aspects where we felt that they provided support or they wanted us to be involved and engaged and off the top of my head I remember the issue around public appointments. As the GLC we were saying all these public appointments have been made to boards and quangos, and there were very few black people. And I know we were instrumental in trying to get those senior civil servants to try and change that so that they were far more open to create a more diverse governing body for these appointments.

Z: What do you think the legacy is of the GLC on London as a city, its cityscape if you like

A: I think, I mean, its attitude towards green open spaces was I think very commendable and were it not for the GLC, we may have lost far more green sites and brown sites and more building of houses, that's something that we face up until today now. I think there certainly is a need for a strategic authority and I think there's a recommendation that said so with the creation of the great GLA that in the end is a version of the GLC so that the GLC certainly established a need for that strategic approach towards planning and towards development. I think, London would have been better I think, definitely with a good left-wing authority in that strategic position.

Z: A lot of people from my generation are really not familiar with the GLC story, this is why this project exists to an extent. What are your reflections on that kind of forgetting of the GLC?

A: Like everything else I think the contributions made by people, the contribution made by institutions and organisations, are soon lost if they're not captured, archived and celebrated. SO just in the way in which individual members of the black community who have intervened and struggled and participated and created changes can well be lost for their individual contributions to that. Because we haven't archived their contributions, we haven't acknowledged their contributions, we haven't celebrated it, we haven't put it anywhere, in any digital forms or archival forms or anything like that. So too with the GLC. In the sense that, alright, all the documentations are in the archives, but with little, anybody with little access to it wouldn't appreciate the context in which some of these things happen. And I think this is where your project is particularly important because it's for the first time, like anything else, it will begin to place whatever happened there within a very important context so that people can understand and be able to access, be able to reach as and when necessary. We have to begin to acknowledge what everybody did, what these organisations did, what each local authority did. And each little bit had nuances and developments that were as instructive and illustrative as any other on a strategic level. So within each individual department the little stories the little vignettes that we could talk about that's very very useful. And we have that as well within the race equality unit. Our relationship with black artists for example, the extent to which we had to go through to manipulate local authority legal elements to bring somebody from abroad, purely because there are limitations on how much we could pay for flight. So those little struggles, those tiny little struggles, also there are far bigger struggles over our relationship with the IRA and so on. That also instructed what happened at the GLC. Because you know Ken had that radical element. We did have a relationship with Sin Fein, we did have a relationship with the IRA and those elements needs to be also explored.

Z: Final question: how do you envisage this exploration and this project and going back into the GLC history changing the direction of London in the future?

**A: Well for me on a very personal level it forces me to rethink, I haven't done this before since leaving the GLC, look back on it as a period of experience, part of the CV, part of the opportunities you came from but we need to have that reflective moment. And we need to have that reflective moment with others as well. Because again you bring it to your own perspectives and sometimes our perspectives is very narrow in its interpretation and I accept that and I acknowledge that. Once you get older, the memory fades and sometimes the contextual elements within that recollection is lost. And I think you can triangulate that assessment of those things by sitting down with somebody else, two or three other people, comparing notes, comparing experiences and for me that's the important thing. So you can capture an individual but perhaps what might be the next step is to bring three or four of those individuals together to then test the accuracy of that interpretation to see where it came from because I can tell you we will shift allegiances and shift interpretations When you hear somebody else's recollections it sometimes helps to formulate your own recollections and then you get a far truer picture.**

**FINISH**