

## **The GLC Story Oral History Project**

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Date of interview: 7 March 2017

Location: Norwich

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AD:

If you could just start off by describing your background, sorta thing.

LB:

Ok, I was born in 1950 in London. My mother was Jewish, working class. My father was Nigerian, Catholic. And they married, which is not very usual in those days. They got married on 6<sup>th</sup> June 1949 and I'm their first born. I was born in December 1950. My mother was very worried that she couldn't have children because she hadn't got pregnant, which kinda made me laugh. Anyway, my father was very disappointed because he wanted a boy and he got me (laughs) And I went to – I think – I can't remember what – Anyway, my parents bought a house in Brixton. In fact, one of our neighbours didn't speak to us for I don't remember how many decades. [That] kinda racism was common and you just put up with it. I used to respond to those racists and there were so many, and I'm not just talking about fascists, I'm talking about ordinary people who would make racist comments to me and to my brother. And er, I remember often being told to go back to where I came from. And I would say with a very London accent: "Gimme an ha'penny mate and I'll get on t' bus." They'd be really shocked (cackles) That was good fun. Sort of. Except that I did recognise racism. We didn't use that word. We talked about colour prejudice. And I remember things happened. Being at school, and this is the early 1950s, and being asked to dance around the maypole leaf on Empire Day which is 24<sup>th</sup> May. Except its gone. They've abolished it thankfully. And one of the things we had to sing, or a song was about being thankful for not being Black. Funny enough at age four, I didn't agree with. And I remember being sent to the headmistress's office and being punished for having views, which when I look back I'm very proud of. And what else can I say? I've got a brother. My brother is two years younger. So, my father got his wish to have a son (laughs).

AD:

How did you become involved in politics? Was there a turning point or inspiration for you?

LB:

I'd always be political. I've always been political. It's hard to describe. Even hard to remember because it's a long time ago. Sixty years ago (pauses) I was encouraged to speak up for myself. [My parents] were very clear that 'racism' was wrong. We wouldn't have used that word but that's the word I would now use. And my mother remembered the fascists being on the streets of London. The east end of London where she grew up was – when she was in her... Well, in fact she remembers Mosley on the streets. She was very feisty my mum and quite advanced politically when I think about some of the rubbish that was being said by some mothers who had Black children. She never (pauses) She was respectful of our African heritage and my dad. And so, I grew up respectful of her Jewish heritage and my father's African heritage. And both of them were political. They had things to say about the system. Yeah, it wasn't too bad. I mean lots of things I hated about my dad. He was kinda sexist, expecting me to wash the dishes and whatever, and my brother didn't need to do any of that stuff. And I learnt to speak up for myself. And I was encouraged to. Both of my parents expected me to speak up for myself. Not to endure racism. I remember telling my mother, this was when I was very young, a teacher had a go at a Black boy in the playground. I can't remember the exact words that were spoken but they were very racist. And I went home and told my mother. She worked in a factory. She took time off work the next day and when to go and see the head teacher. And the teacher was made to give an apology for being racist. Although it wasn't called racism in those days, it was called colour prejudice.

AD:

And as you grew into adulthood was that the time when you began to forge your own personal politics, separate from your parents?

LB:

Yes absolutely. I don't know who introduced me to Karl Marx. I lived near to the library – I don't know if you know Minet Library on Knatchbull Road – which has now 'CLOSED DOWN'! I spent most of my youth in that library. I took out 'Das Kapital' and other books. I was seeking an explanation, I knew there had to be an

explanation for racism, and I wasn't aware of sexism at that time. I wasn't aware of it. On a personal level I resisted every attempt to make me do feminine things. It wasn't my cup of tea. But I wasn't aware of feminism. I just personally wouldn't submit to the rubbish of wearing bloody skirts and dresses. Except I had to for school. There were lots of things I had to do but given a choice I would be assertive of my personal 'stuff'. I didn't want to wear nail varnish and you know that kinda stuff.

AD:

Is that what led you on to feminist activism then?

LB:

No, no.

AD:

Was there a particular point?

LB:

Yeah there was a particular point at which I became a feminist but it was much later. I observed the women's liberation movement. No, I don't think it was called the women's liberation movement at that time. I observed the protest, or at least news of the protest of women who invaded the Miss World competition. And whilst I agreed with it, what I perceived was that they were upper middle class white women and though that's not a crime I didn't feel myself drawn to what they were saying. It wasn't relevant to my life as a working-class girl. Never mind a working-class Black girl, etc. So, I didn't identify with feminism until later. I went to university as a mature student. My daughter has just done exactly the same thing. She had three children, I only had two. And I was introduced by my tutors, almost all of them male, to feminism. I was somewhat critical and I distanced myself. It didn't seem to relate to my experience, my life. And I was still stuck on being a Marxist in ways that I think wrongly saw feminism as bourgeois. Clearly a lot of the women who were advocating feminism were. But the bits that the media cover, the bits that get reported can be somewhat narrow. They don't represent all women. There's lots of very nice women, y'know Sandi Toksvig is a lovely woman and very funny, however, she's not necessarily representative of all women nor would she be engaging for many working-class women, black or white. So, I didn't relate to feminism. But I did have an extraordinary thing happen. I realised I'd fallen in love with a woman, which had not occurred to me before. Obviously, I knew the word lesbian, of course I did, but lesbians were white (laughs) It didn't compute to me that I could be a lesbian. Here's me married to a man and two small children, etc. It wasn't something I had thought about. But when it struck me that that's what had happened it was like the scales falling from my eyes.

AD:

So, after that point how did your life change?

LB:

Oh god. Well I was denied access to my children. I mean some terrible bloody things happened. This was in Brighton. My daughter still lives in Brighton with my grandchildren. And my ex-husband is still in the house that we bought together. I identified and became familiar with a whole different world of being a lesbian feminist. It was very different. Everything. We critiqued everything. We didn't take anything as a given. There'd be lots of discussions and arguments. It was great, it was absolutely wonderful. Fabulous for me. It was like being reborn. Pleasure and merriment in that. The hard thing was not having my children and having to fight to have access to my children. But in general, it felt like I had come home. I mean somebody should have told me earlier that I was a lesbian but there you go. I would still have children. I would still have had children. I mean being a lesbian doesn't mean you don't want to have children. Yeah... Like many things in my life, I tend to do things pretty seriously. So, I read lots. I critiqued gender. I had indicated, I didn't particularly think of gender as a child. I mean I thought it was unfair that girls got lots of nasty things to do but I didn't even know about the fact that women weren't getting equal pay. Things like that I didn't know. It was just seen as a norm that of course men would have higher status and all of the rest and be paid more and do certain jobs. And women were barred from certain jobs. And not until 1974 with the

Sexual Discrimination Act and by then I was in my twenties. I didn't realise how things had been before that, for my mother's generation...

AD:

Leading up to the GLC, we're not quite there yet, but what sort of organising were you doing?

LB:

Oh, I was in some bloody awful groups. International Socialist and various others. Not for long! I mean I was in them with this sort of zeal of youth and then I became disenchanted with the Stalinism of them. The male leadership with the men telling you what you ought to think, rubbish like that. So, I did quite a lot of thinking. I do remember I went on the, I think the last Aldermaston March. I can't remember. Might have been 1969. Aldermaston March. I went on lots of demos. So, when the Soviet Union invaded Czechoslovakia. When the Greek colonels took over I was at Grosvenor Square. I was at the big demonstration against the Vietnam War. So, some of those big symbolic things of the seventies I was involved in. Just as myself. I wasn't involved in any group. I would go to show solidarity. I mean, we did feel – I see lots of women doing it now in relation to Trump – of making a statement by being with other women. I mean in this case it was being with other 'people', as there were lots of men there as well. But one didn't want to appear to be agreeing by staying at home or y'know ranting at the television. One wanted to be out with others, making our voices heard to say that we disapproved. So, I did a lot of the stuff of the sixties. I mean, yeah, I definitely was at all the major demonstrations against repression including that of the Soviet Union. It wasn't all anti-capitalist. I mean it was anti-capitalist but definitely anti-Soviet and any other doctrinaire monolithic parties.

AD:

So, was it then after this that you came to be involved at the GIC?

LB:

Well! I graduated. So, I did a politics degree. I moved to London. I needed a job. I got a job actually. I worked at Spare Rib, that was the first thing I did. I left there for political reasons. I don't really want to... (trails off) I left there for political reasons. I got a job and I think I was only there for about six weeks but that's all. Maybe it was as long as two months. And I signed on. I think it was the only time I have ever signed on in my life. I saw a job in Brixton and it was to be a Community Accountant. And I had been, between when I got married and going to university, I had been a tax officer. So, I had gone to the Inland Revenue, got a job at the Inland Revenue and was a lowly Tax Officer. I wasn't a Tax Officer high grade, I wasn't an Inspector. I was just a- Y'know I had got pregnant and I had to go back to work and I had three months' maternity leave and that was it. I had to come back to work because my then husband wasn't working. So, I did quite a lot of stuff. Looking after children, I didn't drive in those days. And then (pauses) and then... I got pregnant again. And I had a termination. I thought, I can't have three children under five which is what would have happened. I would be buried. I would be completely drowned. So, I made a decision that I would have a termination. That I would apply for my driving test and I would apply to go to university. And that's what I did. And I came out, and various other things. So, I think I was twenty-eight years old. Lots of things happen when a person is twenty-eight. Some significant things. So, it was for me. I wasn't consciously doing it. I didn't know about these phases of the moon or whatever these blasted things are. I just knew that I had been faced with these rather important decisions. I knew that I – There's nothing wrong with caring for children, but I knew that I could do more than only care for children and I had a sense that I could make a broader contribution but not as a wife. So, I did go to university and after that came to London and I got a job at Lambeth Inner City Consultative Group as a Community Accountant and I helped... This is after the 1981 uprising yeah, you'll have heard of the uprisings. Sometimes called riots, but we called them uprisings. And rightly, because this was the first generation of, particularly Black men who were being subject (sic) to the most appalling racism of the police. Picking you up for walking down the street. That would be a crime and you could be beaten up and you could be accused of almost anything. Robbing someone's handbag, all kinds of lies. Not suggesting every young man that was picked up was innocent because a few of them were naughty boys. But no more so than white boys. But all the boys were

being targeted. I mean, it was really awful...

So that's what had been happening in the sixties and seventies and by the time we get to '81, some of those young men who had been born here, whose parents hadn't gone home, were being mistreated and had had enough, hence the uprising. Hence the not putting up with the second-class status which was real. I'd seen it and it pained that. I'm not pained by the breaking of windows, I'm pained by the criminalisation of a significant percentage of Black boys for being Black. And I'm still angry, I'm furious actually, I still am. And I want to change the world. That's the point. I don't want those young men, or any young men, to feel that they have to fight and break things and destroy things. I want – I think it's one of the reasons I came to the view about joining the GLC. I could see the Ken Livingstone administration was doing something very different to what was being done previously. I knew of councils which were being lauded as frugal and not spending money. I knew of these Tory run councils who wouldn't do anything for working-class people. Nothing at all. Ironically, the Tories and Thatcher they used to talk about rate payers and they meant householders. The rate payers for them were people who lived in semi-detached houses and who voted Tory. So, I think by the time the Tories had got in for the second time, that would be about '83, I considered re-joining the Labour party which I did. I'd been a member before when I lived in Brighton. I re-joined the Labour party. I saw a job in The Guardian, and I thought it was perfect for me. It was for the GLC, in a women's unit being Team Leader of Equalities and Grants monitoring. Now the grants monitoring bit was all my financial stuff that I had been doing for years. Helping groups set up accounts and management committees and training them and that sort of stuff. The other thing about equality, the job entailed in the women's unit was advising on sexuality. So, it was lesbian, disabled, class wasn't there but I brought it in... And ethnic minority. And that was the GLC, that was back in '84. I think I was the first post holder. So, remember the GLC, I think it was demolished. But that was later. So, I enjoyed the work. I had terrible bosses. Appalling racism – I'm not gonna name them but their memory lingers on. They were appalling towards me. I can't remember what they called me. Something like half-breed or something like that. They were supposed to be leading on race and they were homophobic as well. Apart from that I think they were ok. (laughs) I didn't get much support from the bosses.

AD:

And the role. Can you go into a bit more detail of the remit of it? What sort of groups were you supporting?

LB:

Yeah. One of the good things that the GLC did do was to fund and support new groups of people who hadn't had money before. So, groups of working-class women; black and white and Asian and Hindu and Muslim and Jewish. You know it was really amazing. The 'but' was, the finance department wouldn't let the money out. Because the women's committee said yes, the women's unit had prepared the reports to justify why the money was going to be spent and how it was going to be spent and all that stuff. Then finance would always find some reason. So, when I got into the role, in '84 I came across these... I don't think that they were being deliberately racist and sexist but they were putting in place barriers that were stopping these working-class groups from getting the money. So, I – I rather enjoyed this – So I talked with them, these finance people, to see if we could find something realistic. Because of course groups did have to be accountable for spending public money, I mean there's no argument about that. But don't set it up in such a way that groups would never meet the criteria because then they would never get the money that the committee had approved. So, I did some work and training with the groups as to how to be responsible. Because they were employing people, so they needed to know employment law. They didn't have to be experts but they needed to know about equal opportunities recruitment. There was a whole host of stuff that I could see if we could empower them they could share it, they could take the money, use it and be accountable for it. So, I did actually enjoy that work. I really found it satisfying. Because it brought together my skills of knowing about financial accountability how to employ, employment law and helping them to achieve their objectives.

AD:

Were there any groups that you can remember specifically that you helped to do that?

LB:

Oh, God yes. I think they were called 'Ackroyd Nursery' in South London; where I had to go, and see them and work with them. Particularly around the requirement in relation to lesbians because they were a bit perplexed of what they should be doing. So, showing them about discrimination what they might do if there were two lesbian mothers in the group and you know not excluding them. And you know what this one of the debates I had about being pragmatic. Certain groups, particularly religious ones, you would want them to do at least a token. You don't expect them to be on the forefront for sexual liberation, it's just not reasonable. But you do want them to be willing to not sack somebody if they come out. So, it was pragmatic and I enjoyed that. It's something I had to develop because it wasn't there. There were some women in the unit who were more doctrinaire: if you had a policy it should apply to everybody. Well yes, but not in the same way. It needed to be proportionate. So, I enjoyed developing that stuff. And I did have some difficulties with the two homophobic Black women who were in my team and in the end, I moved away from managing them.

AD:

Were there any groups that never got funding?

LB:

I can't think of any that didn't. I mean maybe I never saw them. I only saw the ones that had been funded because it was making sure they met their terms and conditions of grant and things like that, so I don't really know. I can't think of [any] and I don't know how I would have known. There were other teams in the unit that would have encouraged groups to join and my role was once they had been improved to monitor them.

AD:

During your time at the GLC are there any particular groups or projects that you're particularly proud of? Was there a highlight for you?

LB:

No. We were... All of the women in the unit worked very hard. WE had different facets to do. Mine was no more important than anybody else's. It was exciting for me working inside local government which I hadn't done before. The last bit at the GLC was interesting because the GLC had been abolished by Thatcher and by then I was a councillor in Lambeth. It had been agreed by, I think it was thirteen... or maybe it was fifteen... I can't remember exactly how many, but councils in London had agreed, the Labour councils, bar one, had agreed that they would carry on funding the core of the GLC. I can't remember the names of all of them. I remember the race and the women's unit. And in fact, I became the Chair of the body, the London Strategic Policy Unit. So, what I am proud of is that that body created Black History Month because we didn't have Black History Month in the United Kingdom. It wasn't my idea but I supported it and made it happen. And because at that point I was also Leader of Lambeth council so Lambeth did stuff that other councils didn't do. So, since the question was about being proud, I think I would say it's the funding for so many women's groups and especially working-class women's groups. That's the bit I am proud of. And you know it wasn't my decision, I and others would support those groups so that they would know how to be accountable for the money and the potential they had in their communities. I mean you have to remember how hostile the Tories were both the press and Margaret Thatcher of having crèches and childcare. Now, the current tory government is talking about childcare because they take it as a given. When we first were doing this, they were hostile. I mean lots of things that the GLC did were ridiculed in the media and are now the norm. They're not looney left anymore. They're the norm. I mean it would be quite nice to have some acknowledgment. I don't mean personally, I mean all of us who were involved in trying to be more inclusive and trying to be fairer to everybody and include all communities.

AD:

Were there any difficulties or things you think could have been done differently looking back over your time there?

LB:

Hmmmm, I don't know. I mean it was very painful working there because like I said, the homophobia. My two bosses who I shan't name but who were absolutely appalling to me. I think because I was out as a lesbian, I was a councillor, I was Jewish, black; you know, I ticked all the boxes and I wasn't intimidated by them. However, appalling sometimes they were to me. And they really were. Anyway, that's called life.

AD:

Do you think as an institution there was anything that could have been done about those working relationships or where things went?

LB:

I suspect had there not been so much pressure and hostility from outside that the women's unit and maybe some other parts of the GLC would have been less harassed. They were always under pressure. They were always under scrutiny. The media did not like Ken Livingstone. There was huge amounts of criticism and pressure and lots of hostility. Lots of the things he did, and when I say he, there were lots of people there who did some bloody good work, not just him, so you know he has his place but I don't want to elevate him above others. There were lots of good councillors, John McDonald was a councillor there. Er, who else... Reg Rayce. I mean there were whole host of lovely – Deirdre Wood – good people, really good people. I mean I don't have to agree with them on everything but I felt that they cared passionately about the diverse people of London. I remember one time, I can't remember what I was doing, but I came into County Hall, the one that's now a hotel; and I looked around and it was packed with ordinary people. Ordinary working-class people, black and white, y'know, it was. I was thinking ten years [previously] it would not have been the case. Working class people would be inside town halls to pay their rates and that's it. And occasionally cleaning the floor. What the Ken Livingstone administration did was to make town halls and local government services relevant and transparent and joyous even. It shouldn't be knocked. I mean what the Tories are doing now and have done since they've been in power is to close down every service that people need. Privatising services. If we had a properly free press the media would be looking at who are the shareholders of the companies who have got the contracts to do the services that councils used to do. People are making profit out of suffering and y'know, eurgh.... I'm a bit cross.

AD:

When did you first learn that the GLC was to be abolished? What was your reaction?

LB:

Oh, hostility, needless to say. Hostility. And I used the law to find ways round. I remember section 1.37 and 1.32 of the Local Government Act was the... She, that woman... It was discretionary expenditure, the product of a two [pence] in the pound rate that could be used for radical things. We wouldn't call them radical today, at the time they were called radical. Doing all kinds of things for the benefit of working class people that Thatcher tried to stop. And I can't remember which councils would take out injunctions and various other things and huge amounts of public money being spent on lawyers stopping benefits to working class people. I'm still cross about it. I'm still disgusted. I am horrified how little our media, our supposed free press, are saying about the real impact of cuts. So, the rates have been cut and the people who benefit are the people in big houses. The rich benefit from low rates for, what are they called, community jugs, council tax. When it was, higher there was more money that could be spent for people who really needed it.

AD:

By the time that the GLC was abolished, were you in Lambeth at that point.

LB:

Yeah, I was councillor, and still working. So, the GLC was abolished on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1986. I became a councillor on 1<sup>st</sup> August 1985. So, it was not a huge amount of time. I was party to the discussions about

what was going to happen for Lambeth and for other councils once the GLC was abolished. So, we were meeting to plan how we could keep the radical bits and get as much money out of the building as possible. So those women's centres who were trying to buy their properties or build nurseries, etc. So, my role was to make sure the money got out to them and they were spending it as they needed because we still had to be accountable for public money. We were not giving people money to put in their own pockets. We were giving money so that there could be benefit for communities who needed it. It was my job in terms of grants monitoring. Monitoring how they spent the money, helping them get the money out, things like that. It was good fun, quite busy and I had a lot of energy. I'd be working all day. I think I'd get into work at eight and I'd leave at six and then I'd go to meetings. It was great.

AD:

How did you feel immediately after the end of the GLC?

LB:

Well we had the LSPU. The London Strategic Policy Unit. I was deeply disappointed of course. And I had no income, because I'd lost my job. And I could work for another... Now, what had 'she' done. She being Thatcher. She stopped you being a councillor and an officer. So, I couldn't work. I had a choice. Being a councillor, in other words doing my democratic duty or having an income. Oh god, it was awful. It took me some time to pay off my debts.

AD:

How do you think it affected you being involved in the GLC looking back at it now?

LB:

I thought it was a tremendous opportunity. To learn things, to be involved. I mean I was friends with John McDonald, Ken Livingstone and Valerie Wise. Most of those people who are still making headway today.

AD:

What would you say were the biggest successes and failures?

LB:

I think making local government interesting and relevant to working-class people because it hadn't been before. And councils are still struggling. I mean it wasn't just the GLC. Manchester City Council! We were politically similar. We wanted to make our town halls and our local governments relevant to all the people not just the ones with the particularly loud voices. That's what was achieved and it was good. Trying to get relevant services for children. Things were really awful. They're not much better now except in principle people know that they should be more inclusive but the money's not there to do the things. But we've won the arguments about inclusion. That's won.

AD:

And failures?

LB:

I dunno... I dunno. No. I'm not aware. None come to mind. And I haven't in the last thirty-five years thought "That was a failure!" I have thought "I wish we were still doing that!"

AD:

What do you think would have happened had it not been abolished?

LB:

There would have been less pressure. We could have taken things more slowly because we had very little time. Oh, and why hasn't there been an indictment on the waste of public money in abolishing the GLC and creating another one, The Greater London Authority. I mean, didn't that cost millions of pounds. Why has



there been no indictment of the Tories for wasting public money? They talk about us wasting money. We were trying to ensure that working-class people, black and white benefitted. And actually, one of the things I must say is that there was some really important work done around disability at the GLC. Some good work around sexuality. Good work around women's issues and ethnic minority presence. Some of that work around equal opportunities recruitment. The GLC led it, and in fact it's one of the people I really should name, Herman Ousley, now Lord Ousley. He was Head of the Ethnic Minority unit and he introduced and demanded and led some really important equal opportunities procedures and practices so that we weren't just getting the same narrow cohort of white university educated men deciding everything and running everything. Some great stuff happened at the GLC. I mean for me it was quite painful because I was being bullied but... You know all kinds of stuff happening. But you know, putting that aside if you look objectively at what the GLC did it was amazing. Great.

AD:

So, final question. For young people today wanting to bring about social change would you still advocate the sort of model you did?

LB:

Oh look, change can be in lots of different places. This happened to be local government. Mean change needs to happen in workplaces, on the street, everywhere. And local government is 'a' place but I wouldn't want to say it's the 'the' place any more than factories and offices are the place. Everywhere should be places where people make a useful contribution in their work and in their community. From each according to their ability. We have different abilities to do things. Different strengths and interests and that's what I love about socialism. Some really important things have been done by socialists in the name of socialism and I'd like to see more of it.