

The GLC Story Oral History Project

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JV: So if you could just start by you saying your name, where you were born.

BK: So my name is Brenda Kirsch, I grew up in Hackney, in London, in the 50s and 60s, I did a degree in the late sixties, and I started working from 1970 onwards. I worked – in those days, if people said ‘come and work for my outfit’ you went and worked. No equal opportunities, no address, but this was a left wing – I knew people on the left, it’s an organisation that just celebrated it’s 100th birthday called ‘The Labour Research Department’, which does research for trade unions and had been going since 1917. And I knew somebody through student politics who was working there, who said ‘we need researchers’, and I just went along, the guy in charged interviewed me, and I was in. But of course it was very low paid work, but working for the cause, so I ended up working there about 8 or 9 years, I was a researcher, and I was asked to become editor of the monthly magazine. So that’s how I got into journalism, writing in the magazine. The areas I specialised in, I used to keep tabs on the extreme right, and employers organisations that were seeking to blacklist workers. I also kept records of political donations [of] which major companies, and mining companies were supporting the Tory party. So for example, I wrote up a booklet on the National Front, and that sort of thing.

JV: And that was published through the...?

BK: Through that organisation, yes. And actually, we got sued, that’s another story – I can easily divert, but I won’t divert.

JV: You can divert for a bit.

BK: Somebody I named on the booklet on the National Front sued us. For libel. We settled out of court, and I’d made a mistake when I’d implied this guy who was at the time quite a well-known WWII hero, he was involved in various right-wing campaigns, I’d suggested that he’d put money behind the National Front, but couldn’t prove it. It was just the word on the street, you know? So we settled out of court, but the very esteemed magazine ‘Searchlight’ which is still going, were a bit cross because they really wanted us to go to court so he would have to expose the source, whether he really did [donate money] – it was just such a high-risk strategy, and we couldn’t really go with that. So I’d always been interested in trying to expose and investigate how the state works, and the right wing, that had always been my area of interest.

JV: Where was that office?

BK: It was in Blackfriars Road.

JV: And you stopped working there when?

BK: I got a bit stressed out because it was pretty intense work, those days before computers, producing a monthly magazine was quite hard work. So I left in 82, and I got a temporary job working at a magazine called ‘City Limits’, because a journalist on there you might have heard of called Bea Campbell,

she's a very well known feminist and Marxist, she was taking a six month sabbatical to write a book. So she asked me to fill in for her. So I worked on this magazine as a reporter for six months, and then parallel to that I was very very politically active. Alongside that, in 1970 I joined the Communist Party, and I got very active in it. And when I worked in Labour Research Department we were all members of trade unions, and I got involved in the trade union. In fact, I can't remember whether I was secretary of the branch or not, I just can't remember. But I was a delegate to the conference.

JV: This is all in the Hackney branches?

BK: No, this was in... I grew up in Hackney but I went to Birmingham University for two years to do a degree, I never actually completed it. When I came back from Birmingham I shared a flat with friends in Clapham. So I was very active politically in Lambeth, which is this borough. Because of my involvement with trade union branch, I then became involved in Lambeth Trade Council. I don't know whether – they don't really exist anymore but they used to be borough-based committees of all the unions that had branches in that borough. They would get together and discuss matters. So I became very involved, in fact, I think I was chair of the Lambeth Trade Union Council for quite a number of years. And through my involvement with that, I'd been also very interested in anti-racist activity. I'd been involved in all sorts of anti-racist committees. When I came back to London from Birmingham I set up a Free Angela Davis committee in Lambeth. All white people – anti-racist movement in Lambeth, all white people. So there was a white left anti-racist movement, sort of parallel to what was going on in the Black community. I know these days, some people looking back on that regard us as being racist. One interpretation of the time is that we were racist, we were sort of well intentioned white people, we weren't actually being hostile or squeezing out Black people, we were in our own little white bubble, right? I was very inspired by Angela Davis who was a Black American communist. But in the USA the Communist Party had a completely different relationship to the Black community, a different history. Anyway, I was involved in anti-racist groups, mainly white, and there was a growing concern over the policing of the Black community, of young Black men, using the SUS law, the numbers of young Black men in police custody. In Stoke Newington Police Station, the 70s, something like 3 or 4 young Black men had actually died in the station. In the Lambeth Trade Union Council, although we were largely, overwhelmingly a white group, and the Lambeth Council had a few Black representatives but not very many. I can't remember how it emerged but the council set up an enquiry into community-police relations in Lambeth, and I was the nominee from the trade council to sit on that. So that was at the time that the left in Labour were getting into positions of power in various local authorities. And it was just before Ken Livingstone won the GLC for Labour. Lambeth, Hackney, Sheffield, all over the country, Liverpool, there were left Labour groups getting in. So this was very much part of the agenda. So I sat in this committee with produced this report, which came out in January 1981, and we warned there would be trouble. And two months later the Brixton Riots broke out. So that indicated that the problem was there.

JV: So this was published by the trade unions?

BK: No, this was published by the London Borough of Lambeth. It was an official Lambeth publication, and the community of inquiry included a well-known Barrister, councillors, and only one Black person. Oh actually was Tony, Tony Bays might have been a Black councillor, but Amrit Wilson was quite a well-known Asian-origin writer. So it indicates that at that time, the Labour movement really had very little involvement from the Black community. You know, there were parallel Black community associations, which we didn't really connect with, apart from a sort of rather patronising 'oh yes, well, they're doing a good job.'

JV: So how did you feel about that, sort of then and now?

BK: I think it was part of the historic moment. I mean, now, it just wouldn't happen like that. Now if a council set up a committee looking into police relations in a multicultural borough, that wouldn't be a mainly white body, that would be a multicultural body, and it would have representatives from diverse groups. So there were diverse groups there, but they were sort of under the radar of the left, and the Labour movement at the time. There was above the line, and below the line. I suppose also there was a sense in which Black communities were isolated from civil society, there were active groups, there were quite a few active Black people in the Communist Party, but they were groups of Jamaicans or West Africans or Indians who were going back home to fight colonialism, you know? So I think you have to really judge that as part of the historic moment. One of the things that came out of that, parallel to this I also got involved in something called... There was movement, certainly around London, to set up police monitoring groups, so I was in the Lambeth Police Monitoring Group. Again, everyone mostly white, and we were sort of keeping a watch on what the police were doing and reporting things back. We were quite limited, we didn't really understand or appreciate the extent to which police racism [existed]. We knew about it theoretically, we could see all the figures, the police stopped young Black men disproportionately, and SUS [laws], and then there was a process of criminalisation. They were just stopped on the streets, got into an argy-bargy of protests as anybody would, and then they'd get arrested, for no reason other than standing up for themselves. But because I think we thought those Black youth were individuals and unorganised, we didn't know how to make contact with them. There were Black community groups in Lambeth that were growing. So I was involved with that. Getting back to my work situation, the GLC in 1981 elected a Labour council, which then exercised a sort of coup, and Ken Livingstone became leader. And that engendered what became the GLC period.

JV: How did that feel? To see the Labour politicians get key sets in the areas you described before? How did it feel, watching that?

BK: Oh, it was really good, because the GLC had been run by rather pompous Tory individuals, it just seemed very remote, it seemed like it would also be Tory controlled. It had no purchase, it didn't bear any relationship to what was going on on the group. Although the GLC had lots of power, because it ran London Transport, it built houses – there was GLC housing estates all over the place, there was London Police Committee. No, that wasn't part of the GLC. It funded Covent Garden and Sadlers Wells, that was basically what it was doing. I should explain, being in the Communist Party, I felt that a lot of the people in the Labour Party making grounds, were what I would call leftist, they were too left for me. And they

were tied in with groups that were militant, there were various entryist groups, there were loads of groups on the left, you know, IMG, and SLL, and the SWP. In fact we often used to... We all used to drink in the same pub in Brixton. The white left, this is white left. There were pubs around the corner, in Coldharbour Lane, they were Black pubs, white left drank in The Railway, now closed down.

JV: That was the name of the pub?

BK: Yes, we drank there. We knew each other and we used to get into political rows with them, I had a different perspective on moving forward, I used to always think that the militant group were too out of touch, with day to day lives. So when those sort of people started winning positions in Labour councils, I was always slightly critical. Because I thought they were after their own agenda. So although I associated Ken Livingstone with that sort of position on the left, at some point, I'm not quite sure when, he realised that there was... So those people were battling in the Labour party, but meanwhile outside the Labour party there were all these new groups growing up. There was the women's movement, there was the gay movement, there were people involved in actually, theatre. There were all sorts of things going on and Ken must have thought, "forget about the Labour Party, the right-wing Labour Party leadership, let's get all these people on board'. So at some point, they reached out to a much wider constituency, and that's what made it interesting.

JV: And that was roughly when?

BK: So, he... It must have been from about 81, 82. They started reaching out then. Some of these groups were their mates. One of the things they set up was a sub-committee of the GLC called the Police Committee, to actually monitor the police. Because at that time there wasn't a police authority that was overseeing the Metropolitan Police. So they set up this committee, which was made up Tories and Labour and so on, and they decided that they would have a unit of people working in the council that would monitor and produce factual evidence and information. I should say that they set up the police committee support unit. One of the reasons they did that was that there was a dynamic individual called Tony Bunyan who had been in this area for a long time. He knew lots of people on the left, and he had been involved in campaigns around Ireland, because the occupation of Ireland is going on, and a few years previously, in the 70s, Tony had set up something called State Research, which was a voluntary group of people, a bit like Labour Research. There was a voluntary group of people that was monitoring the state – a bit like an early Edward Snowden sort of type! But before the computers. Actually, I was invited to be a member of this group, State Research...

JV: Is what is now called State Watch?

BK: It is what is now called State Watch, that's right! So you know Tony?

JV: My friend has worked with them.

BK: Tony, he's a key person to interview. He was in there right from the start. Tony set up this voluntary group, and we published a regular magazine, a monthly magazine, and fact bulletin sheets, we had premises in Poland Street. There was a trust set up by somebody involved with the Liberal Party of the Quakers, that actually had a building that had loads of leftist community groups in there. Tony had been instrumental in setting up State Watch, that was an annual publication. He was then well known enough, they must have set it (The Police Committee) with him in mind. I can't remember all of that. So they set up this committee and then a job came up, to be a publications manager, so I applied for the job. That was a proper job application; I was interviewed by people who I knew on the outside – that's how I got to work at the GLC. So I went there in February 1983, and I was full-time publications and information officer, I think. And then parallel to that, I was also still very politically active, I was very involved in the Communist Party, I was quite a senior member of the Communist Party. There were things going on in the Communist Party. One of the things that was going on was that there was a split, this might sound... This is just to explain, I told you I do get a bit...

JV: No, this is fine. This is actually really good.

BK: So there was a split in the Communist Party around people who were what I would call Stalinists, and people who were more democratic socialists. As a result of this split, which was centered around the communist daily paper, The Morning Star, which is still going, the people who controlled the Morning Star disagreed with the direction the Communist Party was taking. Basically, there was a parting of the ways. So because the Communist Party lost the Morning Star, it set up its own newspaper, as a communication measure. When it set up its own newspaper, which was a weekly paper and then a fortnightly paper, I then applied and became deputy editor of that. I went and changed my position at the GLC Police Community Support Unit, I went down from full-time to part-time, and I used to work one week on, one week off. So one week I'd work at the GLC, and then one week I'd work on the newspaper seven days, and help to produce that week's issue.

JV: Very busy.

BK: Yeah, how did I do all these things? I don't know. But I was still publications officer there, so my job was to edit something called 'Policing London', I don't know if you've ever seen a copy of that, I'd like to show you. This is a publication that came out towards the end, it's a bit grubby, which I edited, it was written by researchers there, it's a sort of guide to the Metropolitan Police, which the police themselves said was very useful and handy. So we were monitoring the police and so on, and I was the publications editor. Then the GLC was abolished in March 86, and a number of the support units then went on... Were funded by a number of Labour London boroughs to become the London Strategic Policy Unit. So basically the GLC was abolished politically, but our work went on in a more limited way. The money only lasted for two years, because this was all just after rate-capping, and it had been...

JV: After what, sorry?

BK: Rate capping. There'd been a big Tory push to stop the leftward trend in Labour councils, so the Tory government introduced this limit to how much money councils could spend on things like funding Black community groups, or doing this sort of research. So there was a whole battle going on there, basically between the Thatcher government, and left Labour councils, at that period.

JV: Which resulted in?

BK: Well, it resulted in... The abolition of the GLC was completely political. That was a completely political act by Thatcher because she didn't like the politics. She was prepared to destroy a layer of democracy, although having said that, before Ken Livingstone was leader, the GLC did appear to people to be an unnecessary layer of democracy. Because we had borough councils, so why did we need to put all this money into the GLC? And then during the Livingstone period it became clear that the GLC did have this potential to make quite a lot of strategic change at a London-wide level with you couldn't do at a borough level.

JV: And would you say that became clear to the wider public that it could have this impact?

BK: Yeah, so, I was just reading... I told you in advance my memory was so poor, when Ken Livingstone introduced the 'Fare's fair' policy, which was the most fantastically popular thing. And it immediately, because it reduced the fares, the fares suddenly became affordable, instead of going up every year. There was a cap, a limit, and there was a freeze on fares, it meant travelling around London was so much easier. Then in addition to that, there was all this funding of all these groups and organisations, and an attempt to set a strategy for the economy at London level, for employment, loads of things were coming up. This was then seen as a focus of opposition to the Thatcher government. Because it was London, but there were other local authorities that were attempting to do this in the wake of the GLC, and of what Ken Livingstone was doing. It was possible to operate alternative, like, princedoms, little city-states, so London became like its own city-state, and of course Thatcher found that completely objectionable.

JV: Can you talk about what the feeling was like when the abolition was kind of near it? When you could tell this was coming?

BK: Oh, people were very opposed to it. There was huge reaction in London against it, huge reaction, festivals and demonstrations. But in the same way, this was only a year after the miner's strike, you know all these things have to be read together. So she [Thatcher] felt confident that she had defeated the miners, the miners had been on strike for two years, they were crushed by the policing strategy, which incidentally was something else that we did, I went up to Yorkshire and I observed picket lines and magistrate courts, and things like that. So we were keeping tabs on what was happening.

JV: And you were doing that through the sub-committee?

BK: Through the support unit, yes. See, our justification for that was that the Met Police were being set up to Yorkshire to police the striking miners. So we were monitoring what the Metropolitan Police were doing. So we had complete right to continue, our brief then extended up there, because that's what the Met Police were doing.

JV: You were there on more than one occasion?

BK: I had been up there privately, but on behalf of the GLC I was there for a week with a colleague, we presented a report to the committee, that sort of thing.

JV: How did that feel? Being there, recording it?

BK: It was... I'd seen the police in action, as you may have guessed in the 70s and 80s I'd been on my fair share of demonstrations, there was some every weekend, so I'd seen the police in action. Actually, it was the magistrate's courts that were absolutely shocking, prosecuting people for nothing. It was just so obviously a stitch-up, you know? So much for the neutral state, and the independence of the judiciary. Well, of course it wasn't, because who are the magistrates? The magistrates are retired councillors, and retired local businessmen, so, the magistrates have changed a bit now but back then they were definitely not representative of the community. So just as a couple of examples of what we did, we were presenting the reports to the committee and various things, but also we were reaching out as well, one of the things we did was we released a single, in 1982. There was a new police bill that was proposed. The police committee majority was very critical of this police bill, and the support unit that was briefed was investigating what was in the bill and raising awareness of it. We had a young man that worked with us. I should say at this stage the police committee support unit was much more racially diverse than the anti-racist groups I'd been talking about previously. So we actually did have a number of prominent Black lawyers working with us. And we had this young man who was very interested in... He must have been a DJ on the side. So he suggested we release a reggae number against the bill. So what we did was – this was his brief. We got together a reggae group, they cut a vinyl, and they had a gig at the Brixton Academy called 'Kill the Bill Gig.' So that was another way of reaching to people. I think a general election was called in 83, and the bill was dropped. It wasn't killed, it just sort of evaporated.

JV: What was the name of the bill?

BK: The Police Bill? I think it must have come back in a different form somewhere. So that was one kind of outreach work. And another one was I knew somebody who was involved with an alternative film production company. And they had gone to various parts of the GLC and suggested producing videos to reach out to more people in London about the work of the GLC. So going outside this sort of boring, committee-paper-report type stuff. They made a 30 minute called "Police in London", it was semi-fiction. It was a mixture of fiction and interviews. We had what was quite a well-known actor, I don't think he ever worked again... called David Yip. Years ago, before your time, there was a TV programme called The Chinese Detective, and he was in that. So the actors played reporters investigating London's

police. It was fictional but they also talked to real people, including Paul Boateng and so on. So that was also an attempt to...

JV: What was the working process in making that film, you would give them information and research, and then...?

BK: They did research, they talked to all of us. It was the filming company who did, it must have been Maxim -

JV: That's the name of the film company?

BK: No, Maxim Ford, he's now died actually. Oh and Benjamin Zephaniah, he must have done a special poem actually. And Guido Gasalli (?) who did the script. So the people from the production company came and interviewed people, and they came up with a script, and then we worked on agreeing the final script. Rather, the police committee, Paul Gilroy must have, but Tony would have been the person who agreed it. So it was just different ways of reaching out to people. And the other thing our committee did, like other committees, was fund local monitoring groups, and local projects. We did things like fund – I don't know if you've heard of a film director Julian Isaacs? He went on to become quite a well-known director, and our committee funded an early film project of his, on the basis that it had police investigative content to it.

JV: Do you remember the name of the film?

BK: I can't remember. I will double check his name, and it'll be in his filmography.

JV: Do you remember some of the local monitoring groups?

BK: Yeah, Southall Black Sisters. Do you know Unmesh Desai, they went on to become a Labour councillor in Newham, and he runs the Newham Monitoring Project. There was the gay and lesbian police observation group Galop, there were various Irish groups. I should say, quite a few of the people who had been involved in State Research had links with groups in Ireland, and the Troops Out movement. The month before I started work there was a big hoohah, which has been repeated in all the bashing of Jeremy Corbyn, about the GLC inviting Sinn Fein to London. And in fact Ken Livingstone met Gerry Adams. But the thing that really needled the Evening Standard and the right-wing press was that we gave money to the Troops Out movement, and specific projects about policing of Irish protest and so on.

JV: So your committee gave money to the Troops Out organisation?

BK: Yes. I'd have to double check on that but I think so, that happened before I started working there but I think actually that was one source of funding. Tony would definitely remember that, there's some things I just can't quite remember.

JV: And you said the right-wing press were quite...

BK: Pissed off about that, oh yeah.

JV: Do you remember the press, in general, whilst you were there at the GLC, what kind of relationship – were they antagonistic?

BK: Well, it's always been... The Daily Mail, The Telegraph, they're always going to be antagonistic. And The Guardian had a more critical stance, it was always more favourable to us. But we did lots of reports and publications that were quite central, we weren't just doing crazy extreme things. You know, these were to do with really valid things, that affected Londoners. Like people with mental health issues being taken into police custody. You know, there were loads of very valid issues, that couldn't be dismissed as leftist.

JV: And how did you find working alongside the police? How was the relation with the police?

BK: Well, we weren't working alongside the police. We were a critical observer of the police. But I, on a personal level, did attempt to make contact with some progressive people in the police. Because there were, even at this time, there quite a well-known police Chief Constable called John Alderson who was from the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary, and he was much more like on The Guardian wing of the police. There was a debate going on within the police as to whether you police by consent or you police by control, and where we came in, from the police monitoring groups and State Watch/State Research, was that we were trying to expose policing by control, and there was another way to police. So for example, a mainstream approach, I remember towards... In the last year of the GLC I remember having a discussion with Paul Boateng who was the chair of the committee. One of the things that was coming up was that whilst the police was busy spending resources picking up young Black men in Brixton, meanwhile, it wasn't investigating burglaries, and crimes, and robberies, and so on. So we decided it was important to also call on the police to devote resources to protecting communities from crime. So it wasn't just protecting the state from miners striking and so. We came up with this concept of community safety. Which is now something that is completely acceptable, but it was something that was in the wind. It was a development of something... The police always had a programme on crime prevention, which was, how to look after yourself and prevent crime, so community safety was taking this further, it was about how to build safe communities. And part of it was about, the police had to actually engage with communities, and get the confidence of communities. That was quite a mainstream approach. On a personal level, on the side, getting back to my involvement with the Communist Party. We used to run an annual event called The Communist University of London, which was a week of debate over originally academic subjects, but then it became more political issues, and a whole range of things. I think two or three years running, I was working on a module which was looking at policing, and I managed to get people from within the police, or ex police officers, to come along and speak to us. That was quite interesting. There were always elements, even with all this going on... There were always elements within the Met Police that were very worried about a lot of these developments.

JV: So they came and spoke at the university?

BK: Yeah, I mean, it was just a couple of meetings that I organised. I wouldn't make a big song and dance about it, it was just to give an example that there were people involved in the police who were aware and worried about some of these developments taking place.

JV: And what were you say were some of the most important, or memorable accomplishments or successes for you? Through the community?

BK: Well, I think on a general level, all through the time of the committee and the support unit there were a number of campaigns of injustice that we always campaigned for. And every single one of them has since then been proved to be correct. Particularly the Guilford Four campaign, and the Birmingham Seven I think it was. And then the miners' strike, I think it's accepted now that there was a miscarriage... In fact what happened was that all those miners who got arrested during the strike, a year later none of their cases came to fruition. There are other issues... But there was a consistency about championing injustices. And I would say definitely people like Tony Bunyan, and the other researchers, were very strong about pushing these things. Sorry, I should have said, obviously... When you get into a certain age, your brain just fades. The demonstrations in Ireland were 13 people got killed.

JV: Bloody Sunday?

BK: Bloody Sunday, yeah. Thank you. They were all causes, since they, they have been proved to be injustices. At the time, particularly Tony and the other researchers, the people from the committee, were arguing very strongly, 'no, we insist, these have to be investigated.'

JV: Did that feel kind of strenuous? Being in the GLC and supporting these campaigns, which are less formal and official?

BK: Well, I suppose because everybody was aware there were injustices. It was quite a long time ago, and it's not just politics that changes but the framework around information. So a lot of what we were doing was exposing information, which would otherwise have laid buried away. And so of course now, with Wikipedia, and so on, there's a whole different relationship to information. Some of which is negative, as well as positive. Certainly at that time, just reporting on what was happening in itself was quite an achievement really. Just to say: 'this anti-racist demonstration at New Cross Gate, the police just smashed in with their truncheons, it was wrong, why did they do that? It was vindictive.' It was just reporting the facts, I think State Research, and Labour Research, although we were partisan, we felt to let the facts speak for themselves. I think Tony's approach with State Research was the same – get the facts, let the facts speak for themselves. And then of course you then have credibility as a researcher, and in what you produce. This is why I was also slightly critical of some groups in the left, who I thought were bashing people over the head with positions. You always need to have an evidence base to justify

what you are saying. And this is what we were doing, was having an evidence base, really. So I think that was all very good, yeah.

JV: How did it feel for you, I'm thinking about myself and other people as well... But trying to, at that time, to be in the Communist Party, and in the GLC, and around other groups, how did that feel in terms of the different spheres? To be moving between them?

BK: Yeah, but I think the overwhelming thing is... We all felt, we were all part of the same opposition. And we felt besieged by Thatcherism. Not just besieged by Thatcherism, but at the time there was so much going on. Women's movement, gay and lesbian movement, Irish movement, there was just so much. There were so many things happening and developing and emerging, and so it was all quite exciting really.

JV: Was it one of those things that you distinctly remember feeling inspired by? Or something that happened in the different emerging movements?

BK: I can't give a straight answer to that, because I was so involved in so many different things. I also – what was going on in the Communist Party at the same time was like a whole other parallel story to what was going on. Which rather distracted me, because I was so involved in that. I got a bit sidelined by that. I was sidelined, but on the other hand, I got together with like-minded people, and I was very influenced by the Euro-Communist approach, which in turn was influenced by Gramsci. I very much was influenced by the Gramscian approach to the importance of culture, generally, and the importance of ideas and ideology, the importance of working across different groups... Sometimes working with people that aren't necessarily our political friends, but in order to advance, this is what you do. So for me it was that sort of politics of... A lot of what Ken Livingstone was doing in the GLC had that sort of approach. But it also had negative undertones as well. I think it was that general breadth of people coming together from shared interests, I think the way the GLC brought together people who were working on employment and domestic violence and Black culture, everything coming together like that. I think that was the main thing. And there have been legacies as well, I think at that meeting, when I first mentioned to Debs and others about the GLC, I think I said: "Did you know that, until Ken Livingstone came along, the Royal Festival Hall was locked up all day?" And he came along, and he unlocked it, and you could just walk in there. You didn't have to buy a fancy ticket for a fancy concert, and the next thing you know there's cafés and bars, before that it used to be completely closed off. It was that opening up of public space, that's quite an important legacy.

JV: Do you think that brought with it a kind of mood?

BK: Yeah, people felt confident, like this belongs to us. Because there's... The Arts Council, up until the GLC came along, had millions of pounds of public money, and it just met I think once a year and it gave so much to Covent Garden, and so much to Sadler's Wells, so much to The Southbank. And it was all locked up, closed, elite culture. By opening up the doors and still having bands playing in there, and all sorts of music, it made a difference.

JV: Do you remember the kind of theme years? There was thematic years.

BK: Oh, gosh, I had forgotten about them. Remind me.

JV: Police year, anti-racism year, Jobs for change.

BK: Oh yeah, I remember. I can't remember much about them but there were themed years, with money going into projects and exhibitions and displays and of course, organisations that were getting grants from the GLC, were bidding for special projects for those years. It probably was a way of encouraging people to come forward.

JV: So how many people were you working with in your committee?

BK: The committee were the councillors who met once a month to decide on policy. And I was on the police committee support unit, so there would be something like 12 to... I've got a list here from 1985... It would be about 16 research people and about 5 others. So say 20-25 people working there. Those included researchers, lawyers, we had a couple of legally qualified people to go through the bills and legislation. And then people liaising with groups who were applying for grants and funding. But I should say, one of the things that I was particularly keen on – the GLC was one of the best places I've worked at in terms of employment practices. Two things on that. I don't know whether this predated the Ken Livingstone GLC, probably not, but they had fantastically good training opportunities for staff. They had really good training programmes, in fact, I went on a training programme, and as we set up I was invited to be a tutor of the further training programmes. That was a training programme about equality and diversity. There were all grades of staff, they really did encourage staff to get involved. And another thing I did before the end was I was given an admin assistant. It was in the months before the GLC was abolished, and before we abolished I made sure she got re-graded and into a higher salary. It meant that when she left, she could apply for jobs in a slightly higher grade. So I was quite pleased with that. The GLC was very good with involving its own staff in this project as well.

JV: So would you say that the GLC was creating the alternative within itself that it would have liked to see outside of itself as well?

BK: Yeah, I think it was setting very high standards. It was setting high standards for employment. It was a huge place, thousands of people worked there, that's why Thatcher wanted to abolish it, she said it was too expensive. It traditionally had done a whole load of things. I knew people who had worked there from before as architects and so on. I think it had a good reputation as a workplace from before. But during this period, there was much more encouragement of staff at all levels to get involved, in their own staff development and so on. I must say, it was the best paid job I've ever had. So this table we're sitting at, I never owned a table until I worked for the GLC. With the money I earned, I bought this table and these chairs. They're 40 years old.

JV: There was a lot of people working there. Actually, the first thing I want to ask you... So said there was demonstrations and people were upset about the nearing abolition, but at the same time, Thatcher was putting out that it was too expensive, and it was cumbersome. What was the public response? Do you remember it being quite split, or was it generally more that London did not want this thing to end?

BK: I think it was an attack on London, and I think it was seen as that. Because people were worried about the fare policy, it being so popular, what was going to happen to the fares? Up until then, every year, the fares had gone up 5%, 10%, you know. Travelling around London was really expensive. Ordinary Londoners were really worried about that. And then things like the GLC had a certain amount of housing that it built, and of course a tricky relationship with the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA). It still continued. That had incorporated a lot of the equal opportunities policies from the GLC. And all the cultural stuff, it wasn't just opening up Festival Hall. The GLC funded loads of free festivals all over the place. On The Southbank there was the Jubilee Gardens, there was concerts and so going on. All of that was really popular stuff. So we, the people who worked at the GLC, we had a number of one day strikes. But we all got worn out by the end really.

JV: And did the larger team around you feel like a community? Was there a sense of coming together, and getting to know each other? Or did that not work?

BK: Yeah... I've been made redundant in jobs, but when the whole organisation is abolished it's a different thing because everybody is going. I can't remember how many thousands of people lost their jobs. It's a huge thing, it's very very sad, tears were shed.

JV: And your immediate community, your friends and family, what did they think? Of the GLC ending, and you being out of the GLC?

BK: I can't really remember... Because I was still working for this paper called Seven Days, I was writing an occasional comment about the last days and months of the GLC. I remember I wrote a column once saying: 'You can tell it's getting to the end because when I went into the office one day my chair had gone. I don't even have a chair to sit on.' And somebody criticised me, somebody said I was wingeing, but I was just trying to be amusing, this is how things were going. A whole load of us went to the London Strategic Policy Unit, there was a community of us that did stay together for two years afterwards. But on reduced funding, and there were limits on what we could do, it was a token thing. It kept us going for a couple of years but it was a token thing. We tried to do our best with producing material and so on.

JV: What do you feel, were there any downsides to the GLC? Was it not doing as well as it could have in certain fields, were there any negatives?

BK: I think it had some unintended consequences. Although it was very positive that local community groups were given grants to operate, it became clear to me during this process that groups were then becoming dependent on grants, and were becoming little employment organisations, whereas they'd originally set up as community activist groups. So I felt there was some organisations which maybe were

beginning to lose touch with their community base because they then became funded to employ people. And then I think that caused some problems, because if you belong to a community group and you're not funded, you can be at odds with groups that are funded.

JV: Do you have specific examples?

BK: No, I can't. I just remember... This is a bit of an off the wall example. Because there was so many organisations that were funded, they could then afford to pay full rates for various things. This is a completely random example, but it sticks in my mind. Sometime during this period, I went to Turkey through the Communist Party to observe a military trial, because at that stage Turkey hadn't become a democracy, it was a military dictatorship. When I was in Turkey I made a contact with some women who had formed a women's organisation, it was all clandestine. Then I went to the first ever women's movement conference in Istanbul, I went to a flat that women used to come together. They were desperate for contact with feminists from other countries. So when I came back I bought them a subscription to Spare Rib, which was the feminist magazine. After a year, I got a renewal subscription from Spare Rib, and they wanted me to pay like £140 subscription, instead of £10. When I queried this, they said 'well, it's for this women's organisation in Istanbul, so we charge an institutional rate.' Meanwhile, women's groups throughout London that were funded through the GLC could afford to pay a higher subscription to a community magazine like Spare Rib, who then would become independent on this higher income from groups funded by the GLC. So further down the food chain, fish were getting bigger. I tried to explain to the subscription department that this was an illegal group, they're meeting clandestinely in a secret flat, and I was doing this as a personal favour to them. And they mentioned the institutional rate. So it's a bit of a wonky example, but there was a mindset, it almost became a bureaucratic approach that some people had, it was very much of the time.

JV: Do you feel that that had a knock-on effect on how people could organise in their communities?

BK: I think so. I've got no evidence for this but I think because a lot of groups were funded, and became professional, I think their might have been a period of a few years were people forgot how to organise as an unfunded, voluntary community group. People lost the habit of how you organise. So a lot of these groups then converted into being professional organisations and got funding. Things like Rape Crisis that hadn't existed and that organisations like the GLC helped fund, and it became obvious which groups needed funded. But probably lots of other smaller community groups fell by the wayside because they didn't have a sustainable base, you've got to have a base. So that's my criticism, some organisations were funded from the top, and they didn't have the backing from below to sustain them.

So getting back to the film director Isaac Julian, and the GLC funded him to make a film about the death of Colin Roach, which was a notorious case in '83. I was going to say, looking at that online reminded me that one of the important organisations that we funded was Inquest, and actually that was one woman, Deborah Coles (? 1:10:41). Although she never worked for the GLC, she was funded through the GLC and she was one of those stalwart one person campaigners who worked on every area of deaths in custody, whether it's police or prisons. She's run a very good campaign all those years.

JV: So Inquest started through funding from the GLC?

BK: It must have started before, but it got some funding from us.

JV: You still live in London. What would you say are the clear legacies of the GLC?

BK: Certainly Southbank being open, for me that's a really visible thing. A lot has disappeared. There's obviously a lot of memory, there's tangible and intangible. So the fact that Festival Hall is open is tangible, but the intangible has got to do with ways of working, and inclusivity. Factors like organising a rock festival, or a free event in park, can be political. They aren't just entertainment, you can actually bring together culture and politics in order to enlighten and enrich people's lives, and make them think about things. I think festivals in parks with loads of stalls from loads of organisations, that's a big thing. And there were a lot of really interesting people involved in that project, I think it was Ken Livingstone's finest hour, I don't think he's ever... Even when he was Mayor of London more recently, I think the GLC was his finest hour, because he was part of a community of people. It was that coming together of people working in a whole number of different areas – from education to housing, and culture, and different communities, Black communities, ethnic minorities, women's organisations. I think that coming together has helped define the day-to-day London culture now. But they are intangible legacies. And my table and chairs, of course.

JV: Why do you feel that... To a large extent, a lot of young people don't know about the GLC. Why do think that the legacy lost its traction?

BK: I think what was pioneering in '83 is just accepted as a day-to-day thing now. You just accept festivals in parks now, the fact that you can walk into the Festival Hall and have a meeting, it's just part of daily life. There are other political things which I think a lot of young people... I'm very critical of this attempt to drive generations against each other, I think there's ways in which some younger people don't understand what some people of my actually pioneered and struggled and went through. It just seems ridiculous; some of the areas we battled on seem absolutely ridiculous. As a woman, walking into a pub and not being able to buy a pint of beer because the pub would only let you have a half pint of beer. It just seems completely absurd, to say that you would campaign around things like this. The other thing is that the make up of London has changed very considerably, and that's changed things quite a bit. This is something I think I mentioned to Debs and Natasha once before. At the time, 1981, '82, Ireland was such a significant factor in our daily lives, because there was an occupation of Northern Ireland, there was a war going on, there were terrorist events all the time – thousands of people in London got killed through quite a long period. There was a very identifiable Irish community in London who felt besieged in way that there isn't now. There were first and second generation Irish communities in Kilburn and Brent and so on, who felt really isolated and got at within this context. Then you went through a period in the late 80s where the biggest minority communities in London were Caribbean, and Asian. You didn't even have that many African communities in London, let alone European communities. I remember writing a report on immigration in 1991, where immigration had basically leveled off. There

were immigration acts and nationality laws, through the 50s and 60s they'd been increasing immigration in this country not just from Ireland, but from the Caribbean, and the Asian subcontinent. And then at some point in the late 80s/90s, it sort of leveled off. It just leveled out, and it's only since then that there's been other groups. So the fact that London is so diverse now, with people from Africa, Latin America, the whole of Europe, China... That really has given London a whole different feel. So that's quite a big difference actually. So we were working in... The diversity of London was more restricted. At the time it seemed very diverse, we also had very active fascist groups. The National Front, absolutely vicious group. And the fascist demonstrations, and British National Party demonstrations – racism was much rawer. It was much more in your face. By the time the Conservative institutional racism came out, we no longer had the fighting in the streets. But we did have the internalised discrimination within institutions. I mean, in the 80s people were still fighting on the street. So that does make a difference.

JV: So you were telling me a bit about the BNP and the National Front, were there any other antagonists to the kind of work you were doing, in the subcommittee, and what they were doing, was there any conflict? Or did you hear of any conflict with the groups that you were giving funding to?

BK: There were racist attacks going on the whole time. I can't actually think of... I'm sure there were big things going on but because of the conflict between the police and the young black men, in a way, it was always like the police were doing the work of the fascist groups for them, because they were doing the street fighting. And young black men were dying. That was why the policing issue was so symbolic, because it was directly affecting people's lives. In areas like Brixton, I don't recall any fascist activity in Brixton, but the police were operating in a racist way.

JV: And when you were at the GLC and you were doing the work you were doing, and there was improvements being made in terms of monitoring and producing information, and people making active progress in their communities on these issues, at the same time, you had a government that was pushing back, how did you feel about that situation? Did you feel, because of the GLC and because of what was happening, very optimistic?

BK: It was all very optimistic at the time, through the early 80s. But Thatcher was so... The defeat of the miners had repercussions throughout the left and the trade union movement. And once you started the privatization, the selling off of the council houses, reducing the role of local government... The abolition of the GLC was very symbolic, but it was also the beginning of the attack on local authority power. Look at the local authorities now. What powers do they have? In the 80s local authorities had education committees, they built housing, they had stronger planning rules and regulations that they could enforce. Now local authorities collect your rubbish and give you parking tickets. Not just that, we are still fighting to save libraries and so on. At the time, we were very critical of Thatcherism. I think even with the exaggeration that often goes on in the left, even with the scaremongering that went on, I don't think that we realised the complete effect of privatisation, and the dismantling of public services over the years. We might have underestimated the full impact of Thatcherism.

JV: And looking at the political situation now, even specifically to this current context, do you feel optimistic? Some people were saying to me, for example, if we had a Labour government under this current Labour leadership, we could have something like the GLC again. With more funding and all that.

BK: It's certainly got that sort of approach to seeing the virtue of how different elements of society interlock with each other. Education, culture, all these things, interlocking. I'm very optimistic about the enthusiasm of young people, for Big P Politics now, because that's been missing for quite some years, and I was beginning to feel like my generation's ideas would die off with us. But then, when I was your age there were people my age feeling the same thing. 'Oh, Britain's never been as great as it was in 1945 for the left.' So these things go in cycles as well, but there's been a long period of lack of an effective opposition. I mean, there's been things like the camps, and climate change, and so on. But a lot of them seem to have fizzled out. I feel quite optimistic about the Egyptian Spring and what's happened there. You need to have enthusiasm but it needs to be channeled as well, you need to actually channel that enthusiasm into something structured so it can take power. I think what makes me more optimistic about what's going on at the moment, even though I'm not a Labour Party member, but I can see how that enthusiasm a younger generation, for a traditional political party, could then translate into doing other things. I support the progressive alliance, for me this a direct follow through from Gramsci. When I looked at the election results, I saw 40 seats that could have been won by Labour, Lib Dem, or Green alliance coming together. My politics is with tactical voting, and making alliances in order to advance things. But I don't know whether Labour is ready for that [laughs]. Are you in the Labour Party?

JV: No. I do agree with you about tactical alliances. But if you were to sit down one of these young people, who you draw inspiration from, who are doing politics with a Big P like you said, if you were to try and give them some lessons from the past and from the GLC, what would be the key things you would tell them?

BK: Realise there's more people on our side than on their side. Therefore to try and work with as many people as possible on your side, even if it means sometimes making compromises or having to forgo your desired outcome. That's the sort of transitional approach, I would say.

JV: Earlier on you mentioned about the half pint/pint... Which is a very important battle, it's big in its own right. Were you involved in that? Did you get involved in any other areas in the GLC that weren't based around gender, or class? Any successes?

BK: I was involved in women's movement politics from the 70s onwards. The successes come eventually sometimes, rather than actual cheering victories at the time.

JV: Or even, just tell me about what your experiences were, being part of the women's movement at that time, in the GLC, but also you said you were part of it before.

BK: And trade unions, as well. I was involved in a lot of things that didn't actually win. Well, Grunswick... They won their jobs back in Grunswick. But things like that were quite – when somebody's protesting

about losing their job and then they get their job back, that's pretty significant. There are fewer struggles like that at the moment. I think these days, with the economy being what it is, people accept jobs going, or then get demonised. I never thought the closure of the ticket offices on the tubes would ever go ahead, I thought, 'how can they have unstaffed stations?' And now not only is it happening, but when there were protests about it, they never achieved anything. So that's all very sad. But unless you protest you're never going to win. And it does depend on the context, and sometimes things reach a critical mass, and if you just make that last push, the whole thing can change for the better. But you don't know until you're there.

JV: Being part of the Labour movement, and part of the women's movement, did you feel there was a good relationship between two? And between them and the GLC?

BK: I spent a large part of my time in the Labour movement battling for women's rights. That's still an ongoing battle. And the Labour movement, when I was involved, it was quite racist as well. There were known examples of factories where workers managed to keep out Black workers coming on board. Not nice things. You always have to contest, you can work as an alliance but within that you need to contest for the rights of minority groups, that are excluded. There's loads of organisations that are still run by middle-aged white men. Still. And that just goes to show that you need to keep pushing away at these things.

JV: Just a technical question, for my mind, how did the relationship work between the larger committees... There was quite a hierarchical...

BK: There was the main GLC committee, I don't know what it was called, but the Finance Committee was the key one. That ultimately decided all the spending. So this committee, the Police Committee Support Unit, was quite a small committee. It was not marginal, but all these things were add-ons. At the time, the main concerns for the GLC were transport, housing, and education. So all these other things – the Police Committee, the Women's Committee, The Ethnic Minorities Committee, the Culture Committee – were all optional extras really.

JV: Was there a working relationship between all the smaller committees?

BK: Yeah, we'd have joint campaigns, or do joint papers on things. Yes. In the Police Committee we developed a programme on women in policing. So obviously then we worked with the Women's Committee, and we had regular contact with the Ethnic Minorities Unit as well. So yeah, there was crossover going on.

JV: And finally, was there any other reflections that you'd like to add on the GLC?

BK: I really hate the fact that that building has become part commercial, part trashy building. I know it was very privileged to work in that, I had a room with a balcony overlooking the river. Which funnily enough, a neighbor of mine belongs to the gym, which is on the same floor as the floor I used to work

on, so I got a free ticket to the swimming pool, and I walked along this corridor, and it's exactly the same corridor but with carpets, and it's all private hotel rooms now. I just find that area outside the GLC so tacky, I think it's a disgrace. As a Londoner, I just feel so ashamed, that that's one of the tourist hotspots. This tacky area with Mcdonald's and rubbish. Tacky goods and horrible ice cream, I feel so sad about that. And people walking by just don't know what the history of that building is. I'd much rather it would have become a cultural centre or museum, or an arts and community centre, but that was never going to happen.

JV: Thank you very much for taking the time.