

One & Other Project

My name is Verusca Calabria and I'm here today to interview David Bennie on 2nd August, 2010. And we are at the Wellcome Trust building in Euston Road, in London. Thanks for agreeing to be re-interviewed David.

You're welcome.

As I mentioned before, we are doing some post-plinth interviews to gather some content for a website that we are going to form. The One & Other Oral History Collection basically. So just to remind you, you went on the plinth to raise awareness about climate camp.

Yes, it wasn't planned. When I applied to go on the plinth, I mean having heard ... I saw some proposals for the plinth project six months or a year earlier and they were displayed at the National Gallery. And I thought if they did have this particular project, I would probably apply just in case it cropped up. And so I applied, I don't know, two or three months earlier when they were collecting all the names and twice I got a message saying you haven't been selected for this month but we'll consider you for next month. And then four or five days before ... earlier I got a phone call asking if I was available for that particular slot because somebody had dropped out. So I'd not given any thought to it at all, I thought if I was given an invitation to go on the plinth, I'd have time to work out what I was going to do. As it was I had no time at all so my vague intention from the start was if I did go on the plinth, I would do something relating to the history of protest in Trafalgar Square and the most ... there had been a fair amount of press attention to the climate camp at that particular time and I thought I knew that they were planning to have an actual climate camp on Black Heath a few days after I was due to be on the plinth so I thought it would be a good way of, you know, giving them the opportunity to publicise it. I mean I hadn't had any direct contact with climate camp, you know, the way things work is that you have, there are sort of overlaps in circles of people. But I just looked up their website, put a message out. Actually I got almost swamped with emails with various people saying you can do this, you can do that, all sorts of things, it was quite funny, it sort of snowballed. And by the time that the day came, they were, there were four or five climate camp activists there with banners for me and all sorts of other things to take up on the plinth. And it, it saved me to a certain extent of having to make the effort myself but it was quite good.

So you mentioned in the pre-plinth interview that you were planning to go join these people in Black Heath.

I did for a day a few days later and it was both extremely interesting and appealing and at the same time, I didn't feel quite part of it. I think it's more of a generation thing. It was mainly people in their twenties, probably, some a bit younger, some a bit older and although I felt entirely comfortable in that

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environment, I didn't feel quite part of it. It was a curious experience because I think every generation has its radical movements and in my generation that was almost the norm. There was no difficulty in being radical or rebellious because half the people you knew were. It was normal. Whereas I think in the generations that succeeded us, it's got tougher. When I was a student I came from a family which had never had any academic background. Nobody had got O Levels or basic school leaving examinations. And I, for one reason or another, enjoyed learning and found myself in a situation at the age of eighteen where I was being, you know, they were handing out university application forms on the assumption that I would get the right sort of examination results to go to university. And I'd never ... nobody in my family had any experience with that so I didn't really know what it meant at all. So when I was applying to universities, the only criterion I applied ... I didn't really know what university meant, I mean I knew what intellectually, you know, what university is. In terms of an emotional or real understanding it meant nothing to me, so I simply applied to all universities that had student riots in the previous year. And that was my only basis for selecting mine, I wanted to be a revolting student. And you know, it wasn't that difficult, I mean I ended up at the London School of Economics and at that time London School of Economics was regarded as one of the most radical colleges in the country. These days it seems to be regarded as an exceptionally right-wing managerial place where people are just getting themselves trained in order to make vast amounts of money later in their lives. But at that time, you know, there wasn't a single student there who'd admit to be a conservative, or know there was one. He used to attend our student union meetings and he was like a sort of mascot for us because we had someone to laugh at. There was literally only one out conservative in the entire university, in the entire college. And a month or so after I arrived there, we had three days of rioting in the street. You know, quite genteel riots, English riots tend to be fairly genteel, but it was such fun. I virtually gave up all pretense at academic activity, just became a revolting student for the next few years and it was easy in those days, you know, we got student grants, there were no debts, there was just, you know, it was my way, I suppose, in making the transition from childhood to adulthood. And their climate camp, though a lot of people, I can absolutely totally relate to the prevailing mentality, you know. It was lots of people who thought there was something grotesquely wrong with the world and they got to do something about it. But there was something unfortunately in me which was saying yes but we, because they... we've all been there before, you know, I've seen various cycles of radical activities over a period of thirty or forty years and my politics haven't changed at all. My belief in success has dwindled. My view of what the world, how I want the world to be is more or less what it was in the 1970s, which makes me a bit of a dinosaur. I've never been prepared to adapt to the way in which the world has changed in those forty years. I haven't accommodated myself to what has happened in Britain,

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the world in that time, by one means or another, I've managed to stay slightly to one side of it, but so I have, you know.

But when I was in my late teens and early twenties, it really seemed to us that we were going to change the world, that the world could not go on as it was. And as things worked out and I think the world has become worse, rather than better, I mean at that time, being a Leftist, a socialist, or whatever name you want to give to people, was not abnormal. It was a perfectly valid and growing strand within British society. Whereas now, it's almost regarded as a joke. And it's not as though the world has become a better place, the world is becoming a more unequal place in that time, but there seems to be perhaps due to the collapse of Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, which I never, you know, I was never particularly fond of that method of living, but at least there was an alternative, if you see what I mean and now the only gaming in town seems capitalism, materialism, and no one gives any thought beyond it. And I say these people at the climate camp, who for the most part were in their twenties I would say, were seeing the world in different terms and they and I didn't have the heart to say to them that in all probability they weren't going to achieve their aims. We have to do this, we have to do that, and I didn't feel able. So there were a lot of interesting, you know, debates and events and so on going in the course of the day there and I found it stimulating. But I didn't. I chose, I mean I could theoretically have found myself a spot in a tent somewhere and stayed overnight but I felt as I probably got about as much as I could in the course that day. I know I'd be quite content to have done so and quite used to roughing it, but you know, it was valuable in many respects. And I also discovered a term to describe my own view of the environment. There was one of the, you know, seminars or discussion groups that they had was looking at ... I think the issue of peak oil and the decline of energy supplies and I discovered there's a term that's used by some people within the environment movement which I'm not comfortable with, which is 'doomers' and I think I'm probably a doomer. I think we're all doomed. You know, that the more I look at the ... I mean the more I look at the world, the more I think that we've done everything we can to make things not work and I don't think the worse is going to happen in my lifetime, but I dread to think what the world will be like in fifty or a hundred years time.

Having said that, why do you think you chose to support a climate camp in the first place?

Because, only simply because it was the most publicly radical organisation either that I'd heard of in the press, over the previous few weeks. I have a ... it when I was ... one of the reasons why I've not been that active in sort of organizational terms is that I've never been very good at doing as I'm told by anybody. So my anarchist friends would call me a Trotskiest and my Trotskiest friends would call me an anarchist. That there is something in me

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that it doesn't accept all, doesn't accept doing as I'm told in one way or another. It also caused problems for me at work on occasion as well. My heart is always with organisations that reject society's norms and reject society's hierarchical structures and so, over the years, the way it happens, is in the... when I was a student, there was almost a demonstration every week.

Especially, London School of Economics was not only regarded as radical but it was also, because of its physical location, in the heart of central London and crucially at that time, I don't know if you're familiar with the term, but the press in Britain always used to be referred to by the short-hand term of Fleet Street because until about the 1980s, almost all of the main newspapers were based in Fleet Street which is two minutes walk from the LSE. So basically any time any student activism occurred at the LSE, it'll get covered in the press. So the importance of the LSE as a radical hotbed was exaggerated by its convenience for journalists and so I was used to that process and throughout the seventies, in one way or another, they were all, there were various actions and activities going on and later I got involved in the squatting movement and other things of that nature. But it was a normal part of my life to go on various activist events but the political activism in Britain, no doubt elsewhere, has gone through phases so there are certain key issues at certain times. For instance [?] one of the bigger demonstrations I was on at Trafalgar Square was the poll tax riots in the late seventies. No, it must have been late eighties, it must have been about eighty-nine probably and it was a huge demonstration against a tax change in Britain and it was so big that in fact there were riots going on, I didn't know. Because you know, we were not in the right corner of the mass of people at the time. But that was sort of, every now and then there'd be a major international or national concern which would draw people out. It might have been nuclear weapons, it might have been the National Front, it might have been the Iraq war and these things tend to go in cycles over the years and I tended to go along on the major demonstrations when they'd turn up but by about 1980, I wasn't going every week, so I never belonged to an organisation like the Socialist Workers Party which, you know, manoeuvres and manipulates and organises its people to be there for everywhere as a part of a protest like that. And I never liked that sort of process. So climate camp was one, was one of those organisations that appealed to me but when I read about their actions and so on, there was that sense of people who were, they were not led by a leader and by a committee and so on, a lot of it was autonomous action of one sort of another, and that was something that I instinctively related to.

And I have been on a few sort of environmentalist actions over the years so in, once again ten / fifteen years ago, there were a number of anti-traffic spontaneous organised disruptions in London which I thought was superb, you know. And it was things like that which naturally appealed to me, so my instinct was if I was going to go on the plinth, I didn't have time to organise anything, they were the group I wanted to be involved with. And I do like them,

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I enormously like the feel of the place. I don't know, environmentalism hasn't been my main strand of political thinking. That it's not been one that I've ignored either, I mean as it happens, since the plinth I joined the Green Party and was a sort of paper candidate local elections recently. But the Green Party sometimes seems a bit tame for me. They're very well-intentioned but they're not quite as radical as I would naturally feel. But there's nothing wrong with them but I can't get absolute enthusiasm for them and I am convinced that we as human beings have failed to evolve intellectually as fast as we've evolved technologically in the last century or so. In the space of one century we've acquired the ability to completely overwhelm the planet, but we don't seem to have grown up in that time, to take on the responsibilities that involves and that's ... at the moment I'm writing a novel for my own, for myself, I'm not expecting to publish it and I'm simply envisaging alien beings arrive on this planet twelve thousand years ago and observing the way in which human beings developed over next twelve thousand years, our extraordinary achievements and our extraordinary stupidity.

Thank you for that. Just to unwrap some of the things you've talked about, you mentioned that you wanted to be a revolting student [?] although none of your family had gone to university, so where do you see that desire for change and evolution came from when you were growing up?

Yes, yes. I know how. I can place it almost precisely. In 1968, the year of revolutions, I was sixteen. It's a very impressionable age and my mother thinks, we, we had a very Left-wing English teacher at school. She was almost a prototype for the sort of Leftist teachers that became quite common in the seventies and eighties, but she was a bit ahead of her time. I later heard from somebody else that had also been at the school that she was sacked from her job as a teacher because she'd gone on some of the anti Vietnam War demonstrations and, you know, it'd drawn the attention of the head teacher who was rather traditionalist and the school I went to was, had a very, very poor academic record. They didn't even, at that time, there were two types of examinations for the people at the age of sixteen. There were O Levels which were traditional academic examinations and there were also a more recent examination called the CSE the others were GCEs. Which were meant to be of a lower academic standard for people who were not regarded as being academic. And now for various reasons, which I don't think it's worth going into, but my ... I could have gone to an academic grammar school when I was eleven, my parents asked me if I wanted to go, because it was a sort of ... and I said no, because at the age of eleven, the thought of staying on at school beyond the minimum school leaving age didn't appeal to me. By the time I was sixteen, the last thing I wanted to do was work so I wanted to carry on studying. So I went to a school where the academic standard was phenomenally low, so much so that we had to spend a quarter of our time in English classes and a quarter of our time in maths classes, on the assumption

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that we had to be given absolute basics. But fortunately our English teacher realised that it wasn't really practical to give people dull, boring English lessons once a day for a quarter of their time. So she used it more adventurously. I remember she did things like play us the Sergeant Pepper album and ask us to write about it and things like that. And she was an adventurous teacher and she helped and she was very much a Marxist herself and I think that would have rubbed off on me, in a way that wasn't that precise. But what I do remember is 1968 was very influential on me. I say, I was very politically aware anyway, I mean I was, you know, I read the papers, I was interested in what was going on in the world, the rest of it. But it was an extraordinary year, yes. It started with the Tet offensive in Vietnam. It went on to the May events in Paris and what happened in Czechoslovakia, I mean I, at the time, I found the idea, the concept of socialism with a human face incredibly appealing and I was incredibly saddened when the Russian tanks moved it. And that for me was a much more significant event than say the assassination of the King and [?].

It was an extraordinary year. There hasn't been a year quite like it in my lifetime I don't think. And as it happens, the publicly perceived leader of the May events in Paris was Daniel Cohn-Bandit, now a Green MP, or Euro MP I think. And he was always known as Danny the Red. And he was known as Danny the Red, not necessarily because he was a Leftist, because he also had very red hair. At that time, I had extremely red hair, and I became known as Benny the Red [?]. I wasn't going to give up that reputation so I think from the age of sixteen onwards, I naturally related to radical movements all over the place and, yes, a lot of the radical activity in Britain was taking place at university. So in many ways that's all that being a student meant to me. You know, I thought being a student meant this is your chance to be an official rebel as it were, and that's what I did. But I say I came to it from a completely, at that time, less than a percent of the population went to university, it was very much an elite process, academically. And the great majority of those people, though not all, were from educated families. And it was at university that I first encountered people that'd been privately educated and things like that. I mean I knew they existed in principle, in theory, but I never really expected to cross paths with such people. Many of those were also very Leftist and radical but I couldn't help but notice most of them did quite well for themselves materially, because it was a phase they were going through. And ... I think I was utterly naïve and unaware of what I was doing at that time. I think I was, I had no real contact with the world up until that point. I mean I'd lived at home. Our family life was quite constrained. It was a poor family and I didn't do very much at home other than, you know, go to school, study, read for my own interest, read the papers. I mean I didn't really have a broad ranging social life. Then I went to university. For various reasons, I probably should have gone to university outside London and completely escaped family constraints, but the pressure was put on me, by my father, not to leave home,

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so I went to one in London. And as it happened, my father died at the end of my first year, and by the end of my second year, I was hardly staying at home. It was just sort of a quite a gentle transition. And by the third year I'd left home. And it was a normal, it was normal in our generation for people to leave home in their late teens, early twenties and establish their independence, especially if they were at university. That classic way in which that generation broke free of, I mean people sometimes forget how very traditional society was in the early sixties, you know. It was, it had much in common with the forties or fifties. It was very you know, people perceive a swinging London and the Beatles, and all the rest of it, but it took quite a while before that filtered to the broader range of people. And tradition, at school we still had you know, have short hair and wear uniforms and all the rest of it, and that was a norm, even in an East end school and suddenly I found myself in an environment where there were virtually no rules and my reaction to it wasn't entirely typical. There's something in me that's quite unprepared to do what everybody else was doing. So even though I rebelled, I also rebelled against the standard forms of rebellion. So everybody else I knew was very sexually active and taking drugs and I wasn't. I was just amused to be a part of the scene without actually participating in it, you know. I would stay up all night with people who were taking acid but wasn't taking it myself. And finding it highly entertaining but didn't over indulge. But I liked the fact that what all my friends were doing was illegal.

Just to go back to life at home, how did your family to take it, your decision that you were going to go to university?

It was no big thing. I was neither encouraged nor discouraged. I say when I was eleven, I had a mark that would have allowed me to go to what they would call grammar schools at that time, which would have been more academic education. And I was asked and I said "Oh no, they have to stay at school until they're sixteen, no I don't want to do that." Because if you come from a family without an educational background, there's no impetus. My family background was plain odd, but then again, I mean I say this and people agree it was a strange background, but many people do have it, we all have our odd backgrounds of one sort or another. My father was blind from the age of eight, so I only ever knew him as blind. There were five children, I was the oldest, and my mother left us when I was fourteen, so my father was bringing up five children aged between six and fourteen on his own as a blind man which is, you know, these days would be regarded as a sort of classic case of social deprivation. We never had much in the way of income. His income came from playing piano in pubs, piano tuning and things like that, and all sorts of little business come criminal activities on the side, you know. He played piano in East End pubs so he knew all the criminals, including the Crays and all the other famous criminals of the time. You know that was just a normal part of East End life. We were brought up to regard the police as the

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enemy, you know, because there were always little things or slightly bigger things my parents were doing which were not really legal and they had a shop at one time and some of the things, some of the goods that they sold, they'd bought cheaply because they were stolen and things like that, you know. They would get, my father, I can remember one occasion where my father went somewhere to buy some stolen cigarettes to sell in the shop and was cheated. The person took his money and ran off or something similar. And he managed money back with some sort of insurance scam you know, so his whole life was a... he was always trying to manipulate the authorities in one way or another to his own advantage. I don't think he ever paid taxes in his life. If he had, I remember he used to do lots of gambling on the horses. As soon as I learned to read, when I was six or eight years old, my job was to read the newspaper, the racing pages of the paper and take him to the betting shop so that he could put his bets on.

I missed lots of school because of that and there was one occasion when we'd moved to a house in Rumford which was very smart, first time we had a bathroom in our lives at the age of sixteen and it was, you know, the first time we had a comfortable home, bedrooms for most of us individually and we had no money and he got a sort of, he got an informal mortgage from a friend on this place, and he never really paid it off and we had no real furniture. But one week he had two or three good wins on the horses so he went to a furniture shop and he ordered all sorts of extravagant furniture on hire purchase and then, you know, he never paid the installments but by the time that they tried to repossess it we'd almost wrecked the furniture and so they didn't bother to take it back. And that was more or less the story of his life. He was always doing little fiddles of one sort or another. Yes so it was an untypical background in that sense, but he was socially conservative. More or less politically conservative, they're very traditionalist in his outlook. And there was a great deal of conflict between me and him in my, in the last years of his life, between the age of about, I mean I'd always been regarded as a well-behaved, well brought-up, because I was studious, I mean I liked learning. I think it may be partly because I'm small, I was never going to be the football star of the school. I was never going to be able to compete with the big bustling boys, I wasn't going to get involved in fights, there was no point in that. But what I could do is learn you know and I always felt a bit apart from the other kids in the school because I had an interest that they didn't have interest in. And I say in those last few years, I was constantly disputing with my father, whereas, up until ... he's Jewish and he's very much a patriarchal type of figure and he was used to being, you know, not having his word questioned so these things shape us don't they?

Absolutely. So I wanted to ask you more about what influence you think your father has had on you?

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It's interesting. On the day that he died, which was a bit unexpected, he'd been in hospital for a few days, we children weren't ... my mother had come back to live with us because my father had gone into hospital and we didn't realize how serious it was and he died a week or so later. I remember my mother coming up to my room and telling me and I was shocked. I wasn't horrified really but I was, you know, I didn't have a warm relationship with him but I was ... the last thing I was expecting was him to die. But by chance I was reading vaguely in relation to my college course, a biography of Lenin at the time, and I'd reached that point in the biography of Lenin where Lenin's father had died and there was a, I mean it's something I, you remember little things in your life which pinpoint certain moments because it said in that book, the author's comment was that no man really becomes his own man until his father dies. And so it just happened on the day that my father dies, I read this comment that a person doesn't become their own independent self until their father dies and there was a lot of truth in that in our case because he was a very dominant person. It was very ... I mean I went to university in London because he wouldn't really let me leave and I didn't have the strength or determination to confront him on that. And I think my life would have been very different if he'd carried on living for many years because it would have constrained my whole activities. And for many years afterwards, I had dreams in which he wasn't dad, as he came back and he was still constraining me in one way or another and I would have thought in many respects that often people almost by nature try to do the opposite of their parents and I think that there's certainly an element of that in me but I also recognize that certain aspects of him have rubbed off on me. I'm a bit more Jewish than I realize.

We were never brought up religiously, he was only half-Jewish but he was sort of psychologically Jewish and we had lots of Jewish friends and he, you know, it was a sort of ... he wasn't aware, he wasn't interested, he had no particular concerns about that. He would call himself Jewish or Church of England, whatever would pay him best money based on nothing, or whatever would keep the authorities off his back, whatever suited him. But it was ... no, religion wasn't, I was actually sent to a Church of England primary school because my grandmother lived next door. It was convenient to nip into her place for meals but religion was neither important nor unimportant in our family, but he was Jewish in terms of his [?] worldview, his mentality, and all the rest of it. He was very pro-Israel and things like that. And later in life I realised that I'm more Jewish than I'd realised. There's a moment about twenty years ago, having a meal in a restaurant for a friend's birthday, and there were a dozen of us sitting around the table and I was at one end of the table with a couple of people I didn't know enormously well, they were friends of the person who's birthday it was, I mean people I knew moderately. It turned out that all three of us were from partly Jewish families which is, you know, a common enough phenomenon and I said at one point, I don't really feel either Jewish or non-Jewish and one of them turned to me and said,

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Benny, if anybody's Jewish, you're Jewish [and I think there is an element of that there. I mean there were aspects of it, I mean secular Jewish culture is very disputatious, it's a culture of debate and argument, and I think that's rubbed off on me. And possibly I think my father's contempt for authority has taken a slightly different strand in me, but it's still in me in one way or another. I mean I say politically I'm a world removed from him, but neither of us ever had any respect for the powers that be.

And where do you think the contempt for authority came from? From your father's side?

I think most people who lived in the East End, especially at that time knew the police were not to be trusted. Metropolitan police was actually very corrupt in the sixties and seventies. There was a precise moment in which efforts were made to remove corrupt officers and I think it occurred in the seventies, maybe early eighties, but it was something that's a historically documented fact, but if you also come from people who ... many people who lived in the poorer parts of London would not have survived very comfortably if they all, if they always kept the law. So we were almost brought up from childhood, you don't mention anything to the police. The police are not to be trusted and that was, I say sort of, but you didn't have to think about it, it was instinctive. Curious enough one of my brothers later became a policeman. But that was almost chance, he could have just as easily become a criminal, his mentality... and I often feel actually the mentality of police and criminals is very similar. So that's the most obvious form of authority. I wasn't enormously rebellious at school until the last year or two. For the most part, I accepted authority but really I think it was externalised. I always lived my own life internally. No, and my thoughts could never be policed if you see what I mean. And so in some ways I was almost indifferent to authority at school because it didn't have any effect upon my inner life.

In later life as an adult, I mean I have never had a routine working career. When I left university, I took my degree and I got an average grade, despite the fact that I'd done virtually no academic study for the previous two years. I seemed to be capable of writing for forty minutes about something I didn't know very much about, but made it seem plausible and the subject that I took which was a politics degree anyway was such that there weren't really right and wrong answers so if you could write for forty minutes in a vague way about the question, they wouldn't fail you, so I got an average pass and most people on the course, regardless or whether they worked hard or did nothing, got the same grade. It was very hard to get very high or very low grades, but there was a couple of anarchist leaders, now I use that term very advisedly because... Bob Dent and I think his partner's name was Maggie Wellings, they always insisted they'd gone to university to learn, not to get a degree and when we took our final degree papers, they publicly burned their examination

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papers in front of a crowd of cheering students. They decided they weren't going to sit their degree because it was irrelevant to them. They had come to learn and to train themselves in radical thought which they did. He had stood as president of the student union, only on condition that once he was elected, the post would be abolished. He wasn't prepared to be a leader, he was prepared to be a part of a collective leadership, [?] other than that. Funnily enough, a few years ago, there was a letter from what I assume must have been the same person, he was writing from Budapest in, no from ... it might have been Budapest, anyway one of the central European capitals, in reference to the death of a radical poet and said, you know, making a comment about, what was it, he said, there's a quote from his, something like, in my heart an anarchist, in my mind, in my mind a socialist, in my dreams a pacifist or something like that and I think he's one of those people who kept to their principles throughout their time and I lost contact with him and left university, but I took my degree but never used it really. And over the next seven years I did a few months of work in total you know, but a bit here, on the dole there, travel a bit there, very yes. And there was none of us at that time really wanted careers and careers were available to people in the early seventies. The economy, yes world economy hadn't changed and it was still very much a full employment economy. By '75 or '76, unemployment had risen dramatically. It'd been about two percent; suddenly it rose up eight percent. And it was quite easy not to work if you didn't want to and there were still reasonable benefit provisions at that time and then I ended up working for a very alternative housing organisation in the early eighties. First part-time, then full-time, then part-time, at various different jobs, and it went on for eighteen years. And for the first twelve years of that, this was one of those great survivors of seventies radicalism. We had an equal pay worker's collective. There was no hierarchy, there were no bosses and we all got paid the same hourly rate, be we cleaners or office managers or whatever and I totally related to that. That, to me, it was the only way of life that made, that makes, still makes sense to me.

What's the name of the housing association?

It was called at the time Islington Community Housing. In 1984, it changed its name to Alamo Housing Co-op, co-operative and at the same time, decision was taken to have a more conventional hierarchical management structure and I was the loudest single voice against it and very narrowly lost the collective debate on the issue. And so I somehow managed to live through the entire Thatcher era, almost insulated from Thatcherism. You know, we were living in cheap run-down houses in Islington, there was no one telling us what to do. We weren't getting grants or subsidies from elsewhere, so there were, we were not constrained by any external regulations and we were running our own alternative to the way in which society has shifted radically towards hierarchical capitalism. And I carried on working theoretically as a junior

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manager for the organisation for the next four years, but making life impossible for the directors there because I wasn't prepared to accept authority. I mean I was always prepared to accept collective authority, if there was a group decision following debate, even if I didn't agree with it, that seemed fair enough, but I never, I've never been able to accept that just because someone's placed above us, that person decides what we do. So after, after four years I left the organisation and a few years later I ended up working for a local community regeneration scheme near where I live and it was run through local council, with funding from the government and I think every director that we had there found me impossible as well because I mean I didn't care if I lost my job. I didn't care about things like that so, and you know it ended up with me saying at a staff meeting, to the director, in front of every other member of staff, that I no longer had faith in his integrity or his competence. And he, you know bosses don't get that from junior members of staff, but there were, you know, I mean I have never really fitted into normal ways of behaviour and I actually, I say I'm trying to write a novel just for my own ... it's a way of working out some of my own thoughts. But I wrote another one a few years ago, which was also, it was half set in the present then, half set in three hundred years in the future, and it was the [?] the future scenes which gradually reveal themselves to be a sort of utopia, where there were no bosses and there were no hierarchies, and everybody lived a relaxed life. In essence, I'm a creature of the seventies. I want a world that was based upon our seventies' ideals. I don't expect it to happen, but I'm not going to change my mentality.

Thanks for that David. I've got a few more questions actually. Just to go back to some of the things you talked about your family history, you mentioned about your mother leaving.

Yes.

How come she left the family?

There was another man involved though I don't know that there was, that it was necessarily the main reason. She did leave with a man. I didn't really know him, I think he was a vague friend of the family or my parents or whatever, but I think part, I think my feeling is a large chunk of it was that she was finding her own life impossible there. She had a blind husband who was rather domineering and five kids to bring up and very limited resources. I never blamed her for leaving. I mean people say to me that, you know, we have this, women are treated differently in our society, and people are always horrified when mothers leave their children. People are never particularly horrified when fathers leave their children, and I always felt that if I were in her shoes, I would have attempted to escape. Now I can't guarantee that's how I saw things in the past, because one's memory can play tricks. My

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recollection, which may not be entirely accurate, is there were five children, I was the oldest. The three youngest were devastated by their mother's departure. My brother who was the second oldest reacted in the same way that my father, he became very antagonistic towards my mother. My father more or less cut my mother and her family, her uncles, our uncles and aunts and out of our lives, I mean he regarded her as having betrayed him. That's his term. And therefore we weren't going to have contact with her side of the family and we never had contact with his side of the family. His side of the family was a mystery to us so I mean ... but we had six or seven uncles and aunts and various cousins and they were suddenly cut out of our lives. And my reaction was more neutral as I recall it. I was just concerned with, you know, the family surviving in some way or other, getting a few practicalities and putting much of it out of my mind. And I think I have got a tendency to bury many of my emotional responses and I think that has always sort of shaped me in various different ways over the course of my life. When I say I am certainly, I would regard myself as a strong supporter of families and I regard it as personally reasonable for a woman to leave in those circumstances, but whether I necessarily saw it quite so objectively at the time is doubtful but I can't remember for sure.

Okay, thank you. You also mentioned about your passion for learning when you were very young.

Yes, yes.

Before meeting this teacher who you mentioned that influenced you, do you remember what it was that got your interest in learning in the first place?

I said I missed a lot of school when I was young. It was ... if I had the slightest sniffle or whatever, my family, my mother, my father wasn't by any means horrible, but the only time I can ever recall him hitting me was when I ran away from home for a few hours and I think that was just sheer relief almost on his part. I mean, he, I think he genuinely loved us enormously and was very attached to us and he was very emotional. He used to get sort of, I don't know, sort of drunk and sloppy when he came home from the pub and would sometimes, you know, put a coin under our pillow and give us sloppy kisses but he was very unpredictable but he was a difficult person really. He was quite moody. So slightly, I think you better remind me exactly what question you were asking, I think I've strayed a bit.

That's okay, I was just interested in seeing what ...

Oh learning yes. I mean so I think in my second or third year at primary school, I missed more than half the school year. I mean, it's a very vague memory, I can't guarantee it's accurate, but I think of the four hundred half-

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days in the school register, I missed over two hundred of them. And I wasn't a particularly sickly child but I say the slightest thing that was wrong with me, I was regarded as being a bit, you know, physically weak or whatever and I was kept at home. And as a result, I was a bit behind in my first two or three years at school and at the age of eight or so, I was maybe nearly nine, I was not reading properly and I was, a few of us were taken into a separate group with the headmaster to bring our reading on. And suddenly my reading took off, you know, a certain point, I could read and I wanted to read everything. And they have a means of measuring your reading age in terms of, you know, the sort of books you're reading and how you understand things and suddenly from the age of ten or eleven, I had a reading age of fifteen or sixteen, you know. It was just one of those things that clicked. I just wanted to read everything, maybe almost as an escape I think. Life at home wasn't terribly exciting or satisfying, but reading stories of one sort or another was. And, you know, I think that's it, I mean to a certain extent, I probably always had a strong interior life.

Thank you. And how about your father's family? Was your father born blind and where did his family live?

No, he was born sighted. At the age of eight he caught meningitis and lost his sight. I have only recently ... one of my brothers has been trying to look into the family history because we never knew anything about my father's side of the family. I had a vague recollection of my mother saying that my father had a brother in Canada and that there'd been some sort of dispute between the two of them over a debt. Knowing my father, I'm sure it was my father who owed the debt rather than the other way around and recently my brother, with the help of a friend who knew about tracing genealogy or whatever, was able to find out a bit more. And it would appear that there is a brother in Canada or there was a brother and that they're still alive. And the family, the Jewish family that my father belonged to, had actually been in this country somewhat surprisingly for six generations because most of the Jews in Britain came over in the early twentieth century, from various East European pogroms. The [?] that they were theatrical costumiers in Covent Garden a century or two ago. But we never knew anything of my father's family. I had this very vague childhood memory of his father, I think his father died when I was three or four years old and I had this very, very vague memory of this old man who would turn up on a handful of occasions and I was the only one of the children who did remember him. And my brother's recent researches have more or less confirmed some of these things but there's one or two things that still require clarification. So my father's family didn't really exist for us as such. It was simply him and my mother's large family. We had lots of contact with her, we lived very close to my grandmother, my mother's mother, my mother's parents, and her, my mother's youngest sister was only five years older than me. So when I went to my primary school, I was in the first year and she was

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in the last year, so there was an almost complete gradation you know in age range. My mother was one of the oldest sisters so we had a fair amount of contact with them, I say that stopped absolutely when my mother left us.

Where did you live in the East End?

We lived in different places. I was brought up in Finsbury Park, which isn't quite the East End, but was one of the poorest areas in London at that time. I'm guessing that my parents took on additional rooms in the house where we lived as the family grew. When I was a child, we lived in a house where ... it was a four-storey house that had a basement, an attic and two floors in between and we had the basement and the ground floor and one room on the floor above and then there was another couple that had other parts of the house. There was no bathroom in the house, there was a toilet shared by eight or ten people. And that was normal, I mean, it was pretty much normal for the street, I mean, it was, this was nineteen fifties. It probably took a decade or two to sort out things like bomb damage in that part of London and that sort of thing, and it was ... so you know the lack of modern facilities wasn't an issue, just was normal. My parents had a ten-year lease on their part of the house and that ran out in 1964 and they were given three choices. They could move out or they could renew the lease for two thousand pounds, or they could buy the whole house for four thousand pounds and that was a reduced price because all the people living there had what was known as sitting tenants rights and therefore it wasn't so valuable as a property to sell because if it was sold to somebody, the new owner would be required to continue renting out at a low rent to the people who were living there. My parents happened to know that the two, the other residents in the house were about to move out. So they bought the house with a short-term loan and sold it and made a couple of thousand pounds profit, and they used that to buy the lease on the shop with accommodation in Forest Gate in Newham in East London. And we were there for four years, between '64 and '68 and it was halfway through that process that my mother moved out. And then, I said my father got a mortgage on the house, which he never paid a penny of the mortgage in Rumford, which was a few miles further out to the east, and more and more towards the suburbs. It was still not exactly prosperous. And after he died, my mother had to give up the house because the mortgage had never been paid, and she moved out of London with my youngest brother who was still at school at that time.

And I've never had particularly close contact with my family since then, you know, because I took a more intellectual direction and a more political direction, I just haven't got much in common with my family. We didn't have anything much to talk about. I get on okay with my, with some of my siblings. I get on badly with one or two of the others, but after, after a few minutes of talking, there's nothing to, I mean, we quite often don't speak to each other

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from one year to the next. I mean it's not that I've been very consciously avoiding them or they've been very consciously avoiding me, but just it you know, it's never seemed that relevant to me.

You've mentioned actually in your pre-plinth interview that you had spoken to your sister while going on the plinth?

Yes, I think I had mentioned it briefly. I think I let her know about the website. I think she managed to catch me on the website, on the web feed or something similar. But I haven't, for instance, had any contact with her since, maybe just once since then sort of. And I get on perfectly well with her, but [?] we've got nothing in common. She lives on a little farm in Devon these days but, we just, we haven't taken the same directions in life.

And how do you feel about the fact that there's a lack of closeness with your family members?

It doesn't bother me. I mean I think I would have liked it enormously if I was from a family where there was a lot of contact with a sense of belonging. I've known people who've got brothers or sisters with similar interests and experiences who yes, it is valuable to have a life-long link, a sense of belonging that goes beyond friendship. There is ... this is unquestioned in its own way but I don't think it can be created artificially. And I do, envy is the wrong word, but I think it would be nice to have that sort of situation, but I say, I don't think it would have applied in my case. I think I am unreasonably detached in my view of such things, I mean it's not a normal attitude in some respects, but I tend to view myself and my [?] and it's fairly objectively rather than subjectively and yes, it was never going to be I think in terms ... and I say, yes, I went to university, I became a student radical. My whole view of the world is entirely different to theirs. My whole life experience has been entirely different to theirs and they're all younger than me so by the time I was nineteen and twenty, I stopped seeing them. My brother was only eight at the time. It's almost irrelevant to me, I mean I've always felt that one chooses one's friends, one doesn't choose one's family. Yes as I say if my family works out well, great, if it doesn't, there's nothing, it doesn't seem that essential to me.

Okay, just to bring you forward now to, you talked about working for the housing co-op in the eighties and then in the pre-plinth interview you mentioned working for a community project, that was coming to an end, I think, at the time?

I think by that time, it's absolutely typical of my experience, the way that ended in some ways. I got involved in the area where I live in London; there's a poor area and it received government funding to try and improve the area,

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fifteen million pounds over ten years. And before it started a leaflet was put around doors asking if there were people who wanted to do a little bit of work on a survey of resident circumstances and attitudes in preparation for this regeneration scheme. And I did that out of sheer curiosity. I wasn't working at the time and I thought it would be interesting to see, a little bit more about my neighbours and so I had to visit about twenty or thirty households and carry out one hour interviews, not, in some ways so very dissimilar to what we're doing now, but much more structured and it is in my nature that when I get involved in something, I become fairly actively involved. So having joined the Green party, I've now become more, a rather more active local member for example. When I joined the housing co-op I'd moved in initially as a resident. Within two weeks I was chairing a meeting of all the residents. It's just, that sort of thing comes naturally to me. And so, with the regeneration scheme, I found myself going on to meetings and chairing meetings and playing a part in the board that was running the initial setting up of the organisation. But due to a difference of opinion, I decided not to continue in that, I mean, allowing individual board members to hold individual opinions, they were supposed to follow, there was no scope for dissent and I am by nature a dissenter. So but six months or a year later, because I was still actively involved as a questioning local resident, I was given a small job working for the organisation, as a community worker within it. And that was ok for a year or two and then we got a new director and he decides to re-shape the organisation. And he created a situation where, well for a start, as far as I was concerned, he'd lied to the board in order to get his way, and that's why I said to the staff meeting that I had no faith in him. His response to that by the way was to abolish staff meetings.

So a stage was reached where our jobs were preserved, but there was no work for us to do, I mean because we were supposed to be the people who would engage the local community in the activities of the organisation. And it was fairly clear he didn't really want local residents to interfere in his plan, so we're in this bizarre situation where there wasn't much work for us to do and so I put in a formal complaint because I had a job but no work. And that went on for a few months, so then the only reason I had carried on that long was because my boss was a person I got on very well with. And she couldn't stand it any longer and she left and they got in somebody else who was clearly brought in to try to control our team, in fact when they were having interviews for that job, one of my colleagues applied for it and was asked at his job interview how he would deal with a member of the team who disagreed with the direction of the organisation, and effectively he was being interviewed to see how he would deal with me. So the new manager turned up. Within three or four weeks I was complaining about her because she kept canceling appointments and so on whereupon I was called in to director's room and said well you've made these complaints, we think we have to investigate them. We'll send you home for a couple of weeks on full pay while we investigate.

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This was just before Christmas in 2007. I said at the time, well Christmas is in four weeks time, this could go on through the new year. He said, oh no, I'm sure it'll be sorted out by before then. I was off work for eleven months on full pay before they finally made me redundant and, you know, I say I'm not capable of doing as I'm told. So it was a year or so after that that I was on the plinth, it's the story of my life that I, if I find authority, I will find reasons, reasons to question it.

And what's happening in your life right now?

I'm not working and I don't know if I will. I mean people ask me if I'm unemployed or whatever, and I don't know. I've always lived extremely simply, I've never ... whenever I, I worked for eighteen years in the housing co-op but every, at no time did it seem likely that it would go on for more than a few months. Either the organisation was in trouble or I had doubts at what I was doing. So it was always, maybe another year or so maybe not. And so I never regarded having an income as a normal circumstance. So when I was working, I lived as cheaply as I could and saved money. That partly goes back to my childhood. When my mother left us, my father's income was extremely variable. He would sometimes have a fair amount of money coming in because he'd done a deal or won some money on the horses or whatever and sometimes he'd have nothing. And sometimes, if he was feeling drunk and generous, he would give us money but he didn't have a regular system of pocket money. And I was the one who would save money. And sometimes I had two or three pounds saved, and he would simply demand it back because we needed it for food. So some people react to material property and uncertainty by being determined to become wealthy or never to be in that situation again. My reaction was to not need much so I've always, whenever I've been working, I've always saved a quarter or half of my pay and so I've always had reasonable savings, which is one of the reasons why no boss could ever intimidate me. I was never worried about losing my job because I always had one or two more years of savings I could survive on, so they couldn't threaten me, which makes me a difficult character. As a result, when I was made redundant and I got a reasonable redundancy pay and I also took the council to the employment tribunal and they gave me a payoff to avoid it going to court, I've got reasonable savings.

I can't claim benefit, but I had to live extremely cheaply so I'm living on seven thousand pounds a year, gradually eating away my savings, and I would rather do that than do a job I don't enjoy. If I could find some means of employment or even unpaid activity that appeals to me, I'd be quite happy to do it. But I'm not prepared to work for the sake of gaining luxuries that I don't need. You know, I regret the fact that I can't, you know, spend a long time traveling abroad these days, but most other things I want to do I can do very simply anyway. So I don't know what I mean ... I'm not working on the

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assumption that I'll have any future employment. I don't know whether I will or not. If something interesting turns up, I'd be interested, but most of the jobs I've got, I've not got by routine methods. I've fallen into them for one reason or another, and I'm not making any desperate methods to find any work to fall into at the moment.

So how do you spend your time?

Some time is spent on Green Party activities, but not a lot, but bits and pieces here and there whenever I can, it's a range of cultural activities. One thing that I think that changed for me is ... okay, let's give you another little anecdote, it was, I think it was 1984, no it would have been, November 5th '83, I was living in a shared house in the housing co-op, you know four or five people, each with a bedroom and sharing living room and kitchen. And a Swiss woman moved in with us for a few months and she was about to move out and [?] arranged for a friend of hers, who was also a Swiss to move in and we didn't know this woman particularly well, she had visited us three or four times, visiting her friend, but a bunch of us went to another friend's house for November 5th, the firework nights and bonfire and so on and so forth, so you know and we walked back home and it was ... we were just sitting up chatting, at one or two in the morning and this Swiss woman was highly intelligent, fully politically aware, but not very familiar with Britain, so we were just talking the general circumstances of you know, politics in Britain through the nineteen you know, Margaret Thatcher's Britain and just outlining, I was outlining to her, she was asking questions about how various things were in Britain. And as I explained things to her, I found myself feeling more and more depressed because I was effectively analysing the situation that we found ourselves in Britain, looking from the outside, if you see what I mean. And I could see that vaguely, by the end of it, I'd come to conclusion that everything you know about our society was wrong and that it was going to get worse rather than better. That everything was loaded against us, you know, all the press was in right-wing hands, everything, I couldn't see any way of things improving, and I think at that point in particular, my political, my idea of what's right politically has never changed. But I think from that point onwards I was far less optimistic about the chances of success, and I think partly because of that, I needed some sort of compensation in life, something to make life tolerably worthwhile. And my interest in various aspects of the arts and culture drew. I've remained political and I've remained politically active in certain ways, but I needed too another form of intellectual stimulation, so I do make sure that I see interesting films and plays and I read worthwhile books and all the rest of it. And that, for me, is a much more worthwhile existence than slaving away in an office. I saw a very interesting film almost by accident on Saturday, which was a Serbian film, at the British Film Institute and it was a sort of parable almost of life in Serbia over the last twenty years with individual scenes which you know, showed abusive power and uncontrolled

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lusts for money and for sex and for power, and people who were so desperate they would believe anything and you know for me, a moment like that is much more worthwhile than most other things. And it, I suppose um I view the purpose of life or mostly as a human being, is to make more sense of the world in which I am living, you know that's all I can realistically expect to achieve in life, is to understand the world in which I am living and try to make sense of it.

Thank you, now just to move back to the experience of the plinth. What do you think the project was about?

I'm not at all sure. Antony Gormley appears to be an interesting enough character. He is mainly known for his sculptures which are mainly based on him. And this is not typical necessarily of his work. And I say I did remember seeing the proposals that were put on display at the National Gallery six months or a year earlier and thinking it would be quite a fun thing to do. And I had gone along to the plinth once or twice before hand, just to, you know, to see other people on it and see what they've put on and I also did it once more, once I was informed, I went a day or two earlier just to get a better feel for it. And I've no idea, what the intellectual concepts are behind it. And I'm not entirely convinced that Gormley or the others working on it have much of a clue themselves. I am not an enormous fan of contemporary art. Very occasionally it's good, very occasionally it's stimulating or thought-provoking, most of the time, to me, it seems self-indulgent. I think the heroic period of modern art was in the first half of the Twentieth-century. And I think that most of what's been done since then has been a fairly desperate attempt to do things differently or give the impression they're doing something new. So as a work of art, I didn't find it impressive, however I think that if people were passing through the square ... there would have been a whole series of curious incidents, and that is no bad thing in itself. And I think in some ways, there's a lot to be said, for having, it's almost a permanent institution that you should give everybody a chance to have an hour or so of being, you know, put on public display and having to justify themselves in one way or another. There's, you know, so I've got no objections to it whatsoever.

I mean being on the plinth was curious. I was surprised by how physically isolating it was, people could hardly hear me down below. I could hardly hear anything that anyone was saying down below. You were only I don't know five or six meters above their heads but it was a very curiously separate space. As well as the climate campers that came along, a couple of friends and their four-year old, five year old daughter came along to have a good laugh at me as well which was very entertaining for the five year old, which was great. But I don't even think it's been necessarily the best item on the plinth. I prefer when the plinth has been used for sculpture. I think that's what the plinth ... certainly it's better sculpture than the things on the other plinths in the square.

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So I, you know, I have no strong view about the success or effectiveness of it. I was rather annoyed to learn it was linked to Sky Arts because as far as I'm concerned that puts me in collaboration with the devil because you know the Rupert Murdoch connection and so on and I think he's well one of the many reasons why our society's a mess and I think that the fact that Sky has an arts channel is just a matter of window dressing as part of their efforts to scale down the BBC and create an increasingly commercialised and nasty society.

Just to bring you back to the experience of the day.

Yes.

You mentioned that you had some interactions with people when you were on the plinth, do you remember any other conversations you may have had and the sort of impact it might have had on you?

I learned afterwards that a friend of mine had been on the plinth, one of the very first people. I wasn't entirely amazed, he's the sort of person who would manage to get himself on it for one reason or another and I think I can't remember exactly what he did but I think he did something mildly provocative and it was a good way for me. I mean I sent, I let quite a few friends know I was going to be on it, it was just, you know, it was a fun means of letting people know you're still doing things as it were. And I say there was very little interaction from the plinth because you were peculiarly isolated. It was ... it helped, it helped to connect me a bit more to environmental politics, because all these young people turned up to help and assist me and one or two of them actually videoed a short interview of me afterwards and I don't, I have no idea whether they used it and I'm not sure I would have gone along to the climate camp had I not been up on the plinth, but having been on the plinth, I was inclined, you know, to check it out anyway which was interesting in itself. But other than that I don't think the impact was dramatic. I mean I think a thousand people went up there, some of them it would have been a key moment in their life or whatever, others would have been, you know, they would have done it and then gone with their lives and it's one of those things that comes up occasionally in conversations with friends and so on and so forth, and I've got, I took a few photographs when up there and one or two friends took photographs of me. And I was photographed, I was in the newspaper because of the climate camp connection; the Evening Standard had a photographer along, and there was a picture of me waving my flag I think on top of the plinth or something like that, something similar though I think from memory I wasn't very recognised when the picture ... I could spot me, but I don't think my face was shown very clearly.

So what impact has it had on you personally, going on the plinth?

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Little or none. It was a fun thing to do. It, you know, it took me two, three or four days to organize it. It took me ... there was a few days afterwards which has some minor follow-up to it, but other than that, it was just one of those, one of the more entertaining things I did during the course of that [?].

And what impact do you think it had for climate camp that you say some newspapers...

Climate camp was already doing a fair amount to publicise what they were doing. Those involved were very pleased that I'd done it. I think it added to their impact. It may have made a few more people aware of what was going on, it may have meant a few more people turned up and that's all well and good. An individual cannot realistically expect to have a massive impact. One doesn't want to be egotistical about these things. All that we can realistically do is small effect upon those around us and have a minimal effect upon the broader vision of society. I mean I think society is in a total mess. I think we're going to learn about it over decades to come and I'm quite hopeful I won't be around to see it at its worse.

Just to look at the impact of the interactivity and the fact that the project was being streamlined live, you have a profile that you set up, which I noticed you didn't put a picture on.

Part of the reason for that is I've only very recently learned how to put pictures on images, I'm not very technologically advanced, but I'm not sure I would have done so anyway. I'm not by nature a personal publicity seeker.

Did you notice you have a few comments on your profile?

No, I never checked it out.

Okay, I'll read you one from your sister here.

Oh, right.

Well could you please enter the word say before the words, that's my brother, thank you, so [?].

Tessa.

And then other friends also wrote, but you obviously didn't see it so I'm going to read you now.

Right.

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So I assume you didn't use any other social networking site?

No, I never have done.

That's okay, not to worry. So I guess we're coming to the end of the interview now [?] just because I wanted to explore the impact of the experience and getting to know you better.

Yes, I mean frankly I'd more or less forgotten about it by the time that you contacted me but it wasn't a major event in my life, = but it was a fun little moment, you know. And I think I, you know, I've kept, I've kept the newspaper photograph for example, as a sort of, you know, physical memory of it. You know, let's face it, all it was a thousand people going up on top of the plinth at an hour at a time. I mean it hasn't changed the world, it hasn't changed London, it hasn't even changed Trafalgar Square. It was noted at the time, it was quickly forgotten about. We're living in a society which has got a short attention span, you know, and it was never profound to begin with. I'm not quite sure what it was, but it was never particularly profound.

Okay, thank you very much. I hope you've enjoyed being interviewed today.

Yes it's fine, yes, it's always interesting, conversation is always stimulating.

Thanks.