

# Municipalism and feminism then and now

## Hilary Wainwright talks to Jo Littler

*Jo: Can you outline how you came to be interested in and involved with prefigurative politics, or as you put it, 'making the path by walking'?*

**Hilary:** It was really the women's movement. Before that, I was involved in the 1968 student movement and before that, the Young Liberals, when they were very radical in the mid-1960s. The student movement's emphasis on participatory democracy established the idea of creating change here and now as we protested - in order to illustrate the kind of society we aimed to create, as we created it. This emphasis broke from the methodology of the old left, for whom the ends justified the means. The student movement's emphasis on participatory democracy rejected both hierarchical and authoritarian models of organisation and an instrumental approach to strategy. These were distinguishing features of the 'new left' that emerged in the 1960s (with strong continuities and associations with the 'new left' that was organised with and around those who had left the Communist Party in 1956, but remained on the left and created new plural, open and democratic forms of collaborative action and principled exploratory debate). But the most powerful and personal sense of creating the future in the present - rather than thinking in terms of only campaigning for demands on government, or on employers, or making a revolution after which everything would be sorted out - came with the women's liberation movement.

Not only did the women's movement affect me and hundreds of other women personally, enabling us to change our existing lives and the relationships that shaped

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our lives in a way that was both self-emancipating and a basis for future change, but we also created a social movement which sustained these personal transformations and enabled them to spread. And it was not just changing us personally and psychologically. Through the women's liberation movement we created material changes in relationships and in conditions of daily life. The most obvious example is childcare: the recognition and the importance - indeed the necessity - of childcare, for any possibility of even building the women's liberation movement. There was also a strong feeling of collective self-confidence that, well, 'we can do it', we can ourselves - and involving men too - create collective childcare in the here and now, which then opens up the possibilities of women being more active, and building the movement whilst alliances were being made with sympathetic and democratic men.

Somehow that very visible, material experience through the women's liberation movement did illustrate very powerfully - because it became part of our everyday lives - a different kind of politics. This experience enabled many of us to see what was wrong with different forms of instrumental politics where 'the ends justify the means', as for example in the Leninism of the SWP which emphasised the overriding importance of 'building the organisation' as the means to change, rather than understanding the organisation as being about supporting people to bring about change in their own lives, collectively here and now, as well as to build sources of transformational capacity for the future. That insight in my own thinking and development was reinforced by working with the shop stewards' movement, particularly the shop stewards' movement in the arms industry on Tyneside. The shop stewards there were wanting to fight for their jobs by developing alternatives as a central part of their struggle for jobs. The Lucas Aerospace workers did the same thing on a more ambitious scale and in a more coherent way. They too were trying to achieve very radical change in the present, and they were doing so by, literally, designing and proto-typing alternative products. So, while prefigurative politics was particularly central to the women's movement, its essential principles and the break it entailed from both the Leninist, party-building left and the parliamentarist left of electoral parties involved more than the women's movement. It was a shared feature of the principles and the practice of many movements that were emerging on the left, independent of party politics. A varied experience of this prefigurative politics was one of the factors which led Sheila Rowbotham, Lynne Segal and I to come together to write *Beyond The Fragments*. All three of us were witnessing possibilities

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similar in basic methodology to those that we'd seen in the women's movement and arising from a similar emphasis on organising now on the basis of the values and principles of the society we were working for.

*Municipalism fits in well with what you describe, in your book A New Politics From the Left, as 'power to, or power as transformative capacity' (as distinct from 'power over'). What do you think are particularly inspiring examples of the new municipalism?*

Well, the first example that inspired me and others at the GLC was a book called *Red Bologna*. I think Robin Murray probably recommended we read it. With hindsight, it was a rather over-optimistic description of what was being achieved at that time in Bologna, but the one thing it did describe that illustrated this idea of 'power as transformative capacity' was the enabling support from the local council for a very imaginative and transformative kind of childcare. We're back to childcare. The book described a big nursery that had originally been created by the women's movement, and a commune movement; then the council supported and helped to consolidate it. This plus our own experiences in the UK led us to build support for popular movements into the economic policy of the GLC. Here was the idea that it wasn't the state alone that was going to bring about change, but that rather the creativity that was transformative, both in its energy and in its practical initiatives, was produced outside of the political process by community, women's and workplace organisations. There were many very dramatic and vivid examples of this. The community initiative in the inner-city neighbourhood of Coin Street struck me as exemplary.

For readers who don't live in London, or weren't around in the 1980s - Coin Street, by the Thames, near Waterloo station, was seen by City developers as a very valuable inner-city, Central London site, ideal for speculative office building. But a community lived there in very good, low-rise housing; there was also a good potential for small business - co-ops and so on. Property developers had plans to buy the land and, on a speculative basis, to build office blocks. Local people were so angry about this that they came together and organised a campaign around an alternative community plan. This was before the Livingstone GLC. As a result of the campaign, they managed to achieve a public inquiry; and then for the public inquiry they elaborated their community plan. They were very resourceful; they had a real sense of the social value of their own community. They created their plan, then some of them or some of their allies became GLC councillors. That was an important part

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of the radical GLC administration led by Ken Livingstone from 1981 to 1986. The Labour Group included councillors who had been involved in these struggles and had become councillors in order primarily to support these local struggles rather than to pursue a political career. They thought that to advance these community-based campaigns it was necessary to win the support of a political authority. There were a number of such local activists, including George Nicolson, who became chair of the planning committee, and also Mike Ward, who was chair of the Industry and Employment Committee, who became leading councillors.

The experience of these councillors influenced the thinking and the political leadership of the GLC, which acted almost spontaneously to say, as in the case of Coin Street: 'OK we'll support the plan of Coin Street community organisations'. This was thus an interesting combination of using the power of the state, in this case, the local state, with the transformative capacity of the people. (Local councils had considerably more power then than now - the power of compulsory purchase, for example.) The GLC took over the land with its compulsory purchase powers and blocked the private developer. But then, instead of presuming that now the land was theirs and they, the GLC, would plan it because it had the planners and the expertise, they insisted that the land be shared with local people and given to the community trust. And then the GLC told them it would make its resources available for the Coin Street Community Trust to develop the plan. If the trust needed any technical help, or it needed grants for local businesses and so on, the GLC was ready to provide it. That was a case of a really transformative municipalism. We tried to follow through Popular Planning with the campaign against City Airport and the People's Plan for the Royal Docks.

*What do you think are the key differences between municipalism then and the new municipalism now? By municipalism I'm thinking of examples like Preston council, their support for co-operatives, contracting locally and planning a mutual people's bank for the region, and Barcelona. What do you think are the major differences between newer municipal projects and those at the GLC?*

There are several differences. Obviously in the UK, the powers of local government have been considerably weakened. Preston is using the powers of procurement in a way which we began to use it at the GLC to a degree, but they've taken it a bit further by using it to give direct support for co-operatives. We were supporting

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co-operatives more through investment funds, and then, generally, as part of our wider public procurement strategy. We called our strategy towards procurement 'contract compliance'. This required the companies that we'd contracted to provide supplies - whether it was pencils or school furniture for the Inner London Education Authority or food and office furniture for the GLC - to adopt equal pay, provide good apprenticeships, pay decent wages, and respect trade union rights. So that idea was present in both the GLC and Preston's approach and in both cases it meant that the council was setting the terms of contracts with the private sector, from the perspective of meeting public goals.

I also think that the same principle of the municipal state being a support for initiatives and transformative capacity in the community or in the workplace applies both in the GLC and in Preston and maybe even more so in Barcelona, in its early phase. What must be remembered about the GLC, of course, is that it was very big, in terms of both its budget and the number of people it employed. The GLC had a budget equivalent to that of many countries and it had considerable power - which was exactly why Margaret Thatcher considered it such a threat.

So there was a difference in scope and, to some degree, bargaining power. Not just bargaining power in terms of our resources vis-a-vis contracted companies or our investment resources vis-a-vis companies that were threatening closure. But also our political platform as the elected political authority of a major capital city. The clout of our political stage meant that we could name and shame multinationals like Ford or at least subject them to public scrutiny. For example, we challenged Ford when it closed the forge in Dagenham. We had a big public inquiry into Ford and organised it on a large and very public scale with the workers, with the international Ford combine committee, and we did a similar project with Kodak. We had the confidence both to take on multinationals and also to attempt to change the basis of international trade - for example through what became [the fair-trade organisation] Twin Trading.

With the abolition of the big strategic authorities like the GLC, the Greater Manchester Authority and so on, there were no longer local authority bodies in the UK, or at least in England, with those kinds of capacities. A further difference with Preston is, I think, that we put more emphasis on a systematic strategy of transforming the state itself. I don't think that's a very explicit feature of the Preston model, but they have, in a way, *had* to begin to transform the state, because they've faced opposition to what they want to do from local government officials and have therefore had to

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think about how to transform the civil service there. In Barcelona, the mayor, Ada Colau, made a lot of political appointments so that she didn't depend on career public servants. Barcelona municipality has a different political system; Ada Colau has never had a majority in the legislative council. Whereas under the GLC, it wasn't a mayoral system, so councillors had much more direct control over actual implementation of policy. This is less easy under the mayoral system because the mayor cannot necessarily get all their policies through the legislative assembly which can be dominated by a different, sometimes opposing, political party.

*At a time just after the general election when left government suddenly seems quite far away again, do you think municipalism will become more important as a source of collective power? I'm thinking about how there's a history of projects emerging out of the wreckage of capitalism, like the Tredgar Medical Aid Society (the forerunner of the NHS) and co-operatives.*

Well I think it has to, but it's not going to be easy because that requires a change in the political leadership of councils, and at a time when government attacks on local services are likely to get worse. And I think that one of the reasons why we lost, say in the North East, and to some degree, Wakefield, some of the North Western towns, and certainly in Stoke, is because in fact people's political alienation, their experience of having no control over the decisions shaping their daily lives, was not actually a result of their experience of Europe, but rather their daily life experience, especially of Labour Councils that took their voters completely for granted, treating them more or less with contempt. Even on the interviews of the election night, you heard working-class people who voted Tory explain their decision by saying 'Labour's done nothing for us round here' as much as they talked about Brexit. I think the lesson of that is that the transformation of the Labour Party that Corbyn initiated, and the democratising movement that led him to take leadership, really needed to reach out more effectively and shake up those complacent local parties and local councils that had lost the trust of their voters. But the Corbyn-stimulated dynamic of change rarely succeeded in reaching most local councils outside the cities. I don't know if 'rotten boroughs' is the right word, but some of them definitely were endemically corrupt in a low level but routine manner. In Durham and Blyth for example, two towns where Labour lost seats, councillors had for decades had a monopoly of working-class representation and were unaccountable and untransparent; often dominated by families and making contracts

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with their friends and relations in private business.

*This leads very well to my next question: that one argument would be that a Labour Party that just saw its 'red wall' crumble in the general election should get more involved in progressive municipalism. Which I guess is what you're saying.*

Yes! That's one part of it. And even from an electoral point of view, a transformation of Labour councils is absolutely necessary. In Preston for example, where Labour introduced significant reforms in the working of the council - reforms that improved the lives of many Preston residents - Labour held on to its vote. But this reforming, improving dynamic in a Labour Council is also important from the point of view of strengthening a sense, and reality, of popular agency, overcoming the political alienation that so damaged Labour in December 2019. To expand on this: consider why Labour did relatively well in Liverpool. I think it has a lot to do with working-class agency. In Liverpool the council was constantly changing hands and Labour had to fight for its votes over the years and had to deliver improvements in council services. It's not a brilliant council, but it's had to do things for the city because no party can take its voters for granted. Moreover, there are the specific traditions of Merseyside: because of being a port and also having a large immigrant, especially Irish, population. There's a pluralistic culture, but on the other hand, there is also a great unity and pride in the city and its people. When Liverpoolians were under attack, like over the tragic disaster at the Hillsborough football stadium (which the *Sun* blamed on drunken Liverpool supporters), there was a real coming together to struggle for justice for the families and memory of those who died. A struggle consistently supported by Jeremy Corbyn. There was a real sense of agency and power which, among other victories, led to the successful 'eclipse of the *Sun*' throughout Merseyside. And so a majority of working-class voters in Liverpool voted 'Remain', partly because for a long time people had *already* been 'taking back control', and also because they are more internationalist and less parochial than in the North East.

*What are the possibilities of different municipal projects connecting together internationally and learning from each other?*

Well there have been attempts at it, haven't there, such as Fearless Cities.<sup>1</sup> I'm not an expert here but I've been to numerous left seminars on municipalism where there's usually somebody from Madrid or Barcelona. So there's a modest international

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network already between the more radical municipalities. Obviously the possibilities of an international network are affected by what's going on at a national level. In many of the countries where there used to be quite a radical municipal tradition, like Italy, they've faced political setbacks because of hostile national governments. Though, again, the municipalities have often been exceptions to the rule. Naples, for example, has a radical Mayor who is taking and supporting some interesting co-operative initiatives. Often these exceptions are beleaguered cities as well as fearless cities. Networks of solidarity and collaboration between them are important. Sometimes those networks have developed around particular sectors like water and energy, or themes like bringing services back in house. There's a lot of very practical work going on in terms of learning lessons. The Transnational Institute - of which I'm a fellow - has been very important in all that: doing work and writing and summarising all the efforts to take resources back into control.<sup>2</sup>

*I like how in your updated section of the new edition of Beyond the Fragments you emphasise the importance of institutional power and social relationships. You talk about the importance of understanding institutions not as hermetic things but as spaces with hidden forms of power; and of paying attention to the quality (and equality) of the relationships we create when we might try to develop forms of collective power. Can you say more about that?*

I suppose our experiences at the GLC were important for giving us an insight into this. My early radical politics was shaped by movements like the student movement and the women's movement, and an early disillusion with electoral politics - seeing parliament as insubstantial and powerless in the face of financial flows, transnational corporations and the civil service. Then I got very interested in movements addressing the power relations of everyday life, like in the family, and personal relations, in schools and in universities and in workplaces generally. But after some time, I also saw that a transformative politics of everyday life was not on its own sufficient. Take the case of the women's movement; we demanded legislation on equal pay and on abortion and we campaigned for local government support to extend services for women. Also in the example of the Lucas Aerospace shop stewards: they campaigned for government action to keep their factories open, and to implement an alternative investment strategy for socially useful purposes.

When the GLC moved to the left and became interested in all these issues, in the women's movement and alternative industrial planning, I decided to be part of it and



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applied to get a job there, with Robin Murray and Mike Cooley. I took the plunge (without quite knowing the implications). Then suddenly I was in this vast building, part of a complex institution, which was very opaque and immensely hierarchical - for instance, we were all called 'officers' on a military model. Even the building reflected this hierarchy. There was one floor that was carpeted and oak-panelled, and this was where 'the members' had their offices, and ordinary officers like me were not allowed up there, unless we were accompanied by, or on a mission of, our senior officer - our 'commander'. I would sometimes find myself up there going to see Mike Ward, our councillor, because it just seemed the natural thing to do. But I never power-dressed and probably looked decidedly too scruffy to be a senior officer. So I would often be picked up by some traditional official, acting as a self-appointed custodian, who would say, 'what are you doing here, have you got the permission of your senior officer?'. There was a group of us who would share our experiences and reflections, and we just thought 'this is completely impossible', so we had to get to work to change those relationships and we just did so in practice, supported by Mike Ward and of course Robin Murray, the head of the Industry and Employment 'Branch'. They were very much part of the change.

From the start we knew that if we were to create this support for popular movements, we had to change the relationships of the GLC itself, both those within the GLC and the relation of the GLC to the people of London and their needs, desires and struggles. And, partly from my experience in the women's movement, I had a strong sense of how existing oppressive relationships depended on people being complicit and reproducing them, even those who suffered under them. I knew from the women's movement that if you refused to reproduce them you could say, 'hang on a minute! We *can* do things differently and we will'. So you could be a modest force for change, simply by your own action and the relationships that you create. Over time and through sustained collective action we began to create a new institutional framework 'in and against' the GLC.

*And can you outline what you did when you directed the GLC's Popular Planning Unit?*

'Director' sounds a lot more hierarchical than it was. We worked as a collective. We cascaded appointments, so I appointed two or three people, including Sheila Rowbotham, and then we in turn all together appointed another group ... people who'd been shop stewards, who'd been community campaigners, that is, whose

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previous experience had been organising popular power in some way or other, independently of the local state. These weren't people who could be 'directed'! And I had no desire to do so. I was more of a co-ordinator and facilitator. We became a kind of collective - well as much of a collective as was possible in the context of an essentially hierarchical institution (we had considerable salary differences, which I once tried to change, but without success).

How did we understand what we were doing? We saw our work as being to unlock the resources of the GLC to support community or workplace organisations that were developing alternative strategies, or to then encourage them to do so. We worked very experimentally and tried several different approaches to finding and working with such organisations. The first experiment was based on the idea that where there is resistance, people are resisting because they are dissatisfied and have an idea of how it could be different. The first resistance that somehow came to my attention was the resistance to what is now City Airport. I would go down to Docklands, to these desperately beleaguered communities in North Woolwich, and sit in on their meetings. I would introduce myself, and explain that the GLC supported their resistance because our manifesto - which was our guiding mandate and source of democratic legitimacy - viewed the future of the Royal Docks as an integrated transport hub - a small dock facility plus rail and road servicing local businesses and communities in the East End, not as a site for an airport to service the City of London, the capital's financial centre. I asked how we could best support their campaign; what's your thinking about alternatives?. They then brainstormed about alternatives and then we'd discuss them ... 'ok, how do you want to put this together and how do you want to involve other people'. Then they'd say things like, 'well, what about having a place?' I clearly remember the voice of Connie Hunt, an inspiring local campaigner who has since died. 'We need a place where we can gather people's ideas', she'd say. 'We could call it a people's plan centre. It would be somewhere people could just drop in when they were doing their shopping or their laundry.' Then I'd help them with a budget, working out how much this would cost, and so on, on the assumption that I could then get back to the GLC to get the Industry and Employment Committee to agree to their budget and grant them funds. They went on to say that they were all very busy and what about employing some staff, local people who would be accountable to the local campaign. And so it would develop. We would again put this into a proposal to the GLC's Industry and Employment

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Committee. And I joined their committee as they set up the People's Plan Centre and appointed four local people with different skills and experiences.

I don't know exactly how to put it ... I was more or less a messenger. I was finding out how we could best support local people who didn't have direct access to the GLC. Increasingly, though, they could just come and present their arguments directly to us at County Hall. Though it was us, as 'officers', who presented it to the Industry and Employment Committee. Once we got the Industry and Employment committee to come and meet in Docklands instead of County Hall. All these councillors - Conservative as well as Labour - had their official meeting in Docklands in a community centre, and local people came to observe it. So we were gradually shifting the balance of power. At one point we tried to do what they did in Coin Street, which in this instance would have been to buy the Royal Docks, to take them over to enable the People's Plan for the Royal Docks to be implemented. But by that time, Thatcher had abolished all the planning powers of the elected GLC and the local borough (Newham) in Docklands and had created the unelected, government-appointed London Docklands Development Corporation. Consequently, we had no power - or at least no statutory power - other than the power that the people were developing through their own self-organisation. With our support, the local campaign developed the plan and they presented it at the public inquiry, and it did lead the inspector to impose some limits on the size and capacity of the airport. The developers didn't get their own way completely.

So that was one thing we did. The other thing we did was that we recognised that to develop plans, people need time. Big corporations employ whole departments of staff whose only job is to think and to develop plans. So we thought 'OK, how do we support workers, particularly, to have the time off to develop their own plans?'. And we developed a whole programme of - I think we called it economic literacy or popular education - where we would work with workplace trade union reps and they would get time off which we would pay for, and then we would pay a tutor and then we would use research developed by the research unit of our branch, our Industry and Employment Branch, as an educational resource. We had these workshops with, for example, furniture shop stewards, who would analyse what was going on in their companies, and then we'd get somebody who had done research into the industry to come and share what they knew about the international markets. The shop stewards then would begin to develop alternatives. Together, we

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produced a little pamphlet called *Beneath the Veneer*. Other people in the unit did similar things. One member, Paul Soto, did a lot of workshops making plans for GLC workers themselves. GLC workers on the Woolwich Ferry, and GLC workers employed in County Hall, developed ideas about their workplace and what they wanted to change. Another member of the Popular Planning Unit, Dave Walsh, did the same kind of work with transport workers in the underground ... so, that was the idea. We wrote about some of this in *A Taste of Power*.<sup>3</sup>

*Can you say some more about the relationship between the women's movement and left movements - like the Institute for Workers Control?*

Well, it's difficult to be precise, although a new book by Sheila Rowbotham due out this year or next will shed a more detailed light on this question. It was partly about context and origins. An important impetus for the women's liberation movement came from women students who had been active in or influenced by the events of 1968; the student movement; the war in Vietnam; the protests in Czechoslovakia and their suppression by the Soviet army; and the movements of workers in France for self-management. The women influenced directly by these events generally saw themselves as socialist feminists and we quite consciously reached out to working-class women and with them campaigned for the trade unions to widen their bargaining and their campaigning agendas. This led us to be interested in idea about workers control and going beyond the conventional limits of defensive trade unionism.

Furthermore, we were socialists in spite of, and in opposition to, Soviet style command economy socialism, without having any precise definition of what we meant by socialism. We were exploring and experimenting as we rebelled and worked on alternatives that met our egalitarian, collaborative and democratic values. So we were open and curious about other socialists, like those involved in the Institute of Workers Control, who shared a similar experimental and open-minded approach.

Finally, a principle we had in common with many of those who were involved in the workers control movement and the libertarian left was a recognition of the knowledge and capacity of people who were oppressed or exploited and marginalised. The idea of them as agents of change was not fully recognised by the Labour Party, which included both workers and women! A lot of us, and Sheila [Rowbotham] and I particularly - without implying we were some sort of vanguard - shared the view, being socialists too, that socialist change is going to come from below, and that

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means conscious change, creative change - supporting workers' knowledge, women's knowledge, and the knowledge of people who would otherwise be marginalised. In a way, feminism, I think maybe more than any other movement, gave us that emphasis. And so we would always be thinking about what makes it possible for workers to exert their possible powers of control. Socialism was always seen as not some ready-made formula, but as something that had to be worked on, and where the process was as important as the goal ... and also, within that, there was a shared belief in the need always to create space for voices that were otherwise being silenced, whether in trade unions, community groups, the women's movement or political parties.

*Have you got any examples of that?*

In the Lucas Combine Committee, they had a methodology which was very much encouraging everybody to speak, because they had to make sure that every factory was behind what they decided to do. To achieve that there had to be a real sense of collective ownership of the discussion, of a decision. So they would chair their meetings in a very facilitating way.

*Were there direct connections between the Lucas Plan and ecofeminism and Greenham? How did they connect?*

Well, it was mainly through the people involved I suppose. Lucas was a male workforce but there were quite a few women involved in it. There was a wonderful woman called Jane Barker, who sadly died, who was a researcher with them, who was a feminist and there was later Val Wise, and Audrey Wise, an MP, who has also died since. Audrey was a working-class socialist feminist and she was involved in the Institute of Workers Control. She would be always very strongly insisting on women's voices being central. I remember at one Institute for Workers Control conference there was a lot of discussion about the Hull fishermen's strike and there was this amazing woman, Lily Bilocca, who came to the platform to speak for the communities in Hull. So, the Institute for Workers Control was quite an interesting organisation that was promoting workers control and was responsive to feminism through Audrey and then Sheila [Rowbotham] - they published a pamphlet of Sheila's. So the Hull fishermen's, trawlermen's strike ... that's a good example. There's a film about it - *The Heroes in Headscarves*.

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*Would you say feminism directly related to your capacity to create projects and institutions, including Red Pepper?*

Yeah I think so. I suppose feminism gives you two things in terms of wider possibilities. One is it gave you a sort of confidence, but also, secondly, it gave you a confidence that was always related to working with other women. At the beginning of *Red Pepper*, there was a group of women. Denise Searle was very important and also two young women, Harriet Hanmer and Michelle Dunne, who came to work for us, and Barbara Gunnell has been and still is very supportive, and there were several others. We all worked together, in different ways. And I remember when we were struggling to raise money for *Red Pepper*, we found this cartoon by feminist cartoonist, Jacky Fleming - the cartoon was printed by Leeds Postcards, and it was a witty image of a very stropy looking woman saying 'we never give up'. So we had that sort of determination. I think also, you know, feminism makes you a bit more open to taking risks - the opposite of risk-averse - willing to be, um, slightly mad! So we were. It was a bit mad, you know, going for this money and then taking the risk of doing it. And it's always been quite women-led; indeed recently it has become more so, with younger women, Jenny Nelson, Siobhan McQuirck, and Rachel Lawrence. And so, feminism was an important spirit in *Red Pepper*, and we were strengthened by the wider support from Sheila and Lynne and other feminists of different generations. We didn't feel we were doing it all on our own. I think if you're innovating and taking risks the mutual support of other women is vitally important. It involves a real solidarity that's personal as well as political. There have been and still are some very good men involved too, very supportive men. But I think also feminism helps you recognise that deep social transformation isn't going to be about overnight change. And a magazine is about creating a different culture, a support for what people are doing to bring about change, refuse the dominant reality, in their daily life, I think is important that we weren't - and still aren't - just oriented towards Westminster and Labour politics, and that we were extra-parliamentary in quite a deep sense, of meaning change in society.

In *Red Pepper* we have a strong feminist emphasis that's been a result, not so much of me but of younger feminists, and that's just meant an alertness to every possible form of subordination and way of being treated as secondary. Ensuring women's voices, ensuring women write, supporting women writers. There's more of an alertness to this now: we always make sure that we actually have a proper balance of women writers. And also there's quite a strong BAME emphasis, an anti-racist, anti-imperialist

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emphasis which maybe wasn't always such a self-conscious feature of 1970s feminism, though it was there. It is, correctly, now to the fore. For example, right now, post-election, there seems a really impressive number of young Asian women involved in politics and as MPs. There's quite a few and they're really strong, and strong politically. I think there are more women MPs now in the Labour Party than men.

*Yes there are. One of the few good results of the election.*

Yeah, we can search for these crumbs!

*My final question: you have said that one of the key features of the GLC was that it went beyond sectarianism and engaged with a wide range of groups regardless of their politics. Is there a lesson here for the Labour Party and other left institutions? (This is perhaps something of a rhetorical question!)*

Yes. I think in general the GLC - and I have to credit Ken Livingstone for some of this - never asked for your party card as a condition of collaboration. I wasn't in the Labour Party when I was working for the GLC (nor when I collaborated with Tony Benn in organising the Socialist Conferences in Chesterfield). I don't think Sheila was either, but, you know, nobody asked us, 'so are you in the Labour Party?'. That was an openness. Most of the people in the Industry of Employment Branch and in the Popular Planning Unit were not in the Labour Party. Some were in the Communist Party, or the Green Party, or not in any party; and that was important. Also, our support for projects - because we had clear criteria for the grants we gave - wasn't based on party-political criteria, they concerned equal opportunities, egalitarian politics, belief in power from below, encouraging the capacity to develop power from below. In a way we were a kind of critical reaction to the state and to party politics - hence the idea which guided us of working 'in and against the state', where the state included the Labour Party. We were working with the particularly radical bit of the Labour Party.

That open, non-tribal, unsectarian spirit is vitally needed on the left just now as we try to rebuild the left on a more effectively transformative basis. The standoff between the Greens and the Labour Party is really debilitating. At this general election, the Greens did well in their own terms; they virtually doubled their vote. If there had been some collaboration - decided on a local basis - it probably would have led to a few more Labour MPs and maybe one or two more Greens as well.

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One just thinks, 'why can't we collaborate when there's so much in common'. I think the question of collaboration with the Lib Dems is different, especially after the reactionary role they played in the coalition with the Tories, on student fees, on the NHS and on austerity in general - failing completely to use their bargaining power. And in this election the stance that the Lib Dems took towards Labour and especially towards Jeremy Corbyn was outrageous. In Kensington where I canvassed for Labour, they lied about their candidate's chances of defeating the Tories and effectively handed the seat to the Tories.

There have to be common political values as a basis for working together. Sectarianism, to me, is always about party interest coming before shared goals and transformative vision. I don't know how you put that lesson into practice, but I think it probably has to start at a local level. You can't easily knock Green and Labour leadership heads together as leaderships tend to put safeguarding their party first. We have to start from where the issues are bubbling up and struggles taking place around which the parties could unite.

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### Notes

1. Bertie Russell, 'Fearless Cities municipalism', *Open Democracy*, 21 February 2019: [www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/fearless-cities-municipalism-experiments-in-autogestion/](http://www.opendemocracy.net/en/can-europe-make-it/fearless-cities-municipalism-experiments-in-autogestion/).
2. *The Future is Public*, Transnational Institute, 2019: [www.tni.org/en/publication/the-future-is-public](http://www.tni.org/en/publication/the-future-is-public).
3. Maureen Mackintosh and Hilary Wainwright, *A Taste of Power: The Politics of Local Economies*, Verso 1987. For Chapter 1 see *The GLC Story* website: <http://glcstory.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/A-Taste-of-Power-intro.pdf>.