**Wanstead**

**Archive Reference: 2015\_esch\_VoLe\_12**

*So to start with John can you just tell me a little bit about, well can you tell me where you were born, and, and a little bit maybe about your childhood?*

Right I spent, I, I was actually born, although I spent very few years there, I was actually born in Zimbabwe because my dad was a teacher there, but my parents were Scottish, so we came back to Scotland, er, when I was relatively young and I spent most of my growing up years in Scotland in Edinburgh and came down to London in my er latish twenties.

*Erm, and what are your predominant memories of growing up in Sc-, in Edinburgh? What do you remember most about Edinburgh growing up?*

It’s a very interesting question, er, er. Going back to Edinburgh now, it feels like going back home, but, er, huh, it was an odd situation cos I had come to Edinburgh, er, having not lived there all my life so I had to get adjusted to a new country, and in some ways looking back, that adjustment, er, to a new country and to a new set of friends, t, maybe twice as you move school, actually was, ahher, it was slightly odd, that although my parents were Scottish through and through and they felt Scottish, I never felt I quite belonged in Scotland, nor did I er feel like, ererer I belonged in Zimbabwe so in a sense my memory is of, you know a relatively happy childhood, but not quite feeling I was part of, I was the same as everybody else I was growing up with.

*Um, interesting. So, tell me again how old you were when you came to Scotland.*

Er, well, we came twice, but, er, initially I was very young, then we went back to Zimbabwe so effectively I was about ten when we came and settled in Scotland.

*Ok, ok, so quite a long time in Zimbabwe first?*

Quite a long time in Zimbabwe and what’s interesting is I have very few memories of er, Zimbabwe. Whether I, whether I enjoyed it or got anything out of it I don’t know, but it it it’s virtually a blank

*Really?*

Which is just extraordinary. My sister, who’s two years younger than me, she can remember everything from virtually the day she was born. Er, er certainly from the day she was two years old er

*Wow*

So, er, but I can remember very, very little of it. So er, in a funny way life begins at ten in, in a strange country

*[laughter]*

With lots of new friends.

*And where abouts were you in Edinburgh? Not that I know Edinburgh very well, but…*

We live, we lived in the suburbs, in in in in the south of Edinburgh. Er and erm yeah, just in many ways a fairly ordinary, middle class erm childhood.

*And did you go to school locally?*

Yeah, yep, yeah er, er, er yes I to a sort of primary school and secondary school both locally erm and school was neither particularly enjoyable, nor particularly unenjoyable, it was just school really [laughter]

*And so what brought you to London, er, in the twenties?*

Initially I wanted just to, erm, come to London just to erm live in London for a few years. That was very much my intention and then to possibly go back up to Scotland. Erm, I suppose just as similarly relatively young just to experience living in London. Er, now clearly the plan didn’t quite work out [laughter] because many years later I am still, er, in London.

*It’s a familiar story*

It’s a very familiar story. That’s right. So that’s what, that’s what brought me to London, erm, and er in London I just did various jobs, er retail, my first job in London was working in WH Smith, erm, er, which was almost as boring as transcribing interviews, and erm just a matter of me xxx. Er but I did er various other retail jobs er er and then I got into campaigning er in in the early 1980’s. Er I got very involved in what was called the Fares Fair campaign when Ken Livingston was er the leader of the GLA first time round. It was a whole controversy about he had promised cheap fares, he delivered cheap fares, er the law courts er ruled illegal, many of us felt that was just a political decision, and there was kind of, almost a London wide campaign to bring back cheap fares. That’s where I first got into campaigning.

*So, so you were straight in with transport right from the beginning*

Yes, I mean, er er, I was straight into transport, er I mean I don’t think it was a kind of deliberate decision I wanted to go into transport, what, what got me riled up, er, what got me going was what I believed to be the unfairness of erm fares going up despite the fact we’d all voted for Ken Livingston to bring down the fares. Erm so it wasn’t the kind of, very little of my life has been planned and and that, that wasn’t a kind of plan that I wanted to go into transport. I was involved in transport campaigning as my first campaign and if I hadn’t got involved in campaigning in London I might well have gone back to Scotland. Er but I gpt involved in campaigning, as we’ll hear, as we go on, that led to, one thing led to another.

*And were you political before you… became involved actively?*

I wa, I was, I was interested, I was interested in politics and in issues, but I hadn’t been involved er as an activist, as, er in my teens from early twenties. I think part of that was my, my parents weren’t political in any way. I didn’t grow up in that sense in a , in an activist household, erm and , and also, er as as a kid I ;lacked self-confidence big time, and an an I wouldn’t have seen getting involved and making a difference in a political party as something that I would do. Er so I think in my teens and my twenties, although I was interested in politics, getting involved was not something I saw as an option for me.

*Uhum Uhum. Erm, what’s my next question? [laughter] Yeah, that was interesting, so did it, did it feel like, was it a kind of, did it impact on your confidence levels this…*

Campaigning?

*This discovery of campaigning and the…*

It, it helped the, er er, yes, but it took many years. It took a long, it took the best part of a decade, for me to gain some sort of self-confidence, er, er, initially when I got involved in what I thinks called the Fare’s Fair campaign, er er and local Fare’s Fair groups around London, mine was in South London, erm I didn’t see myself, I sort of saw myself as just going along to the meetings and taking part. Errrrrr, it would have been inconceivable for me at that stage to have thought of myself as you know chairing a meeting or er you know, anything like that. Er, and I think, that was partly inexperience, cos we all have to start somewhere, that was partly inexperience, er, but I think it was also, it was also a basic lack of self-confidence. An, and it took some years for that to, you know, go away and be build up.

*And do you think it was an unusual lack in self-confidence?*

Yes I do. Yes I do. Er er and I think it erm, I think it maybe goes back to this rather peculiar childhood that I had, er you know, where I felt I wasn’t really part of anything. I, I wasn’t part of Zimbabwe, I, I wasn’t part of any particular schools cos I’ve kept moving around, er and therefor, you know, I just, er, I, I didn’t have this confidence.

*So aside from confidence, do you think, did activism, was there a sense that activism made you part of something? Did, did it you…*

It, it, it did. I’m not sure, it, looking back it did, I’m not sure thought that, erm, that’s certainly not why I went into it, er, and I’m not sure that I actually, it’s essential for me, because I’ve thought about this over the years, er, because I’ve been a kind of activist ever since, could I walk away from it? And and the answer is yes.

*The answer is yes?!*

Yes, the, the

*That’s not what I expected you to say!*

No, th, the, the answer, I probably, I probably could, er er I could walk away, I may choose not to, that’s a different, that’s a different question. You know, I may choose not to walk away from my activism, but if if if if I walked out of the library today, and wasn’t an activist, erm, er er you know, I could, I could live life without activism

*Who would you be if you weren’t an activist?*

[laughter]

*I’m not sure if that’s strictly an oral history question*

Er, I’m not sure I can answer, [laughter] I can answer that. I suppose I’d be myself but without the activism bit there. But that, I would need, that’s a really interesting queation. It’s a pub conversation that really [laughter]

*Well I always think of oral history as a little bit like pub, pub interviews*

Well, because, I like oral history more and more! Why didn’t I get into this earlier [laughter]

*Erm, so ok, ok where were we? So erm your, the Fare’s Fair campaign, can you tell me a little bit, so you, you were in south, in Lambeth*

I was in Lambeth

*Were you, were you living in Lambeth?*

I was living in Lambeth, yes.

*Erm, can you tell me just a little bit about just where you were living, and the sort of circumstances of your-*

Yeah. Erm erm, I was working, I was working at the time in WH Smiths, I think, or, or, or I moved to one or two retail places, but I was certainly doing retail work, in Streatham. And I was living in Lambeth, typical sort of situation. I was living in a bedsit in Lambeth. Er, and er, you know, I, and I lived in the kind of Brixton Clapham Stockwell area for many, many years.

*Where you living by yourself, or with others?*

Er, er I was, it varied. Some of the time I was in a shared house, some, some of the times I was in a kind of bedsit which was part of a shared house, but essentially was, was my own

*Was your own, Yep. Erm, and did you have good, kind of relationships with the people around you, were, were-*

Yeah

*Was there a sense of community?*

Erm, in some of the houses there was, in some of the houses it was more erm, you, you lived on your own, in your own bedsit, or your own little flat. Er, but, yeah, everybody knew each other, fair, and knew each other fairly well.

*And how did you come across the Fare’s Fair campaign? Do you know? Can you remember? When you first because aware of it?*

That is a really good question, I’m not entirely sure I remember, I I I think, because it became quite famous, it, it was the big London issue, it was a big London issue, and I just think [pause] this is dredging the memory bank, but, I, I , I, it was in the papers, it was probably in the south London press, in the Evening Standard, er, it, it , I just went along to the first, went along to a meeting in Lambeth, so I think I must have heard about it, read about it in the papers.

*And do you remember that first meeting you attended?*

I do, I do, yes. I do, becau-, because it was my first meeting as an activist, er a budding activist.

*Did you think of yourself as an activist?*

No. No, no, no. I, I, I’m not sure I really knew the word. I, I, I thought of myself as somebody who felt strongly about this issue, er and wanted to do something about it. Er and there were a whole number of other people there who were in, who I met, who, some of them a little bit more experienced as activists, but on the whole not. Most of them were relatively young, and just wanted to do something about the fares, Fares Fair, er er situation

*So what are your memories of that meeting? If, you know, describe it in the most kind of narrative way that, [laughter]*

Er, it it it’s, I suppose, uncertainty, because if I hadn’t been to a kind of, what we’ll now call an activist meeting before, er I didn’t really know what to expect, didn’t know who would be there, er, er. Yeah, I suppose uncertainty [pause] desire to get to know the other people better, but the fact that I kept going back to it meant that er, well A: I felt strongly about the issue, but B: clearly the meeting and the whole er campaign was working for me

*Uhum. And what were you doing in the campaign? What did the activism actually entail?*

Erm [pause] we, what did we do? We did the normal things like, we, we had street stalls, we wrote letters, th, this is a long time ago now, I, it did lead to. The most dramatic thing was that we than began to take direct action, because the Fairs Fair campaign also had an element called Can’t Pay Won’t Pay, and Can’t Pay Won’t Pay was perhaps, just the kind of, better known thing, was you actually went onto the bus or onto the tube and you had a little ticket, but you didn’t buy a ticket, you simply said ‘can’t pay won’t pay’. Erm, now, what you were meant to do is, er, in in those days there were no ticket barriers, you, you went through a person, and, and instead of having a ticket you just, er you know handed them a little, er, er, er sheet of paper saying can’t pay won’t pay, and then really just ran

*Onto the bus?*

Well, that was on the tube. On the bus, the bus, no the bus was hugely embarrassing, er ha, it just, it just shows how long ago it was, direct action these days people would be er, you know, er have meetings before hand, and think how, how would you support each other, er how do you work with each other. Now this was, you know, this was the early 1980’s and none of that happened, you know, it just wasn’t part of the culture. But we at Lambeth Fares Fair, we thought we’d better do Can’t Pay Won’t Pay, so what, what would we do and it just kind of shows where we were, but ach er. There’d be lots of busses a Piccadilly Circus so let’s go to Piccadilly Circus Saturday afternoon, and what if each of us just get on a bus and say ‘can’t pay won’t pay’? Now, It’s just exactly the wrong thing to do *[laughter]* Exactly the wrong thing to do. So I got on number 38 bus and erm, said erm well it’s obvious but ‘can’t pay won’t pay’ and the conductor quite rightly said ‘what’s that?’ and I said ‘can’t pay won’t pay’ and he said ‘Well mate bus’s not going anywhere’ and all these people were just looking at me, whether they were going shopping or up to cinema or football or, and I thought ‘oh shit, what am I going to do here’ and, and, the idea was we knew what would happen, they would stop the bus until the police came, and then the police would ask you to leave, and we all decided that we would leave if the police said so, otherwise you get arrested or course, there was no point. So er, er I thought oh God, when are these police going to turn up? There taking ten minutes, you know, I was more concerned to see the police than the rest of the people on the bus, anyway, that was a memory, and it was a vivid memory, as it was hugely embarrassing. Er, I don’t think as a Lambeth group we ever did busses again, er

*Did the police come?*

Yeah, the police came, and they simply said ‘why, why won’t you pay your fair’ and I said ‘can’t pay won’t pay’ I mean, wh, f, which, it was a fairly well known slogan, and they said ‘well we’re going to ask you to get off the bus.’ And in that case I will get off the bus, you know if I didn’t get off the bus they would’ve arrested me, and, and I think we’d decided as group that actually we’d done the protest, there was no point getting arrested as well. So, that I certainly do remember

*And, erm, just to go back to what you said before, that it was a stupid approach*

It was

*Can you just tell me how you’d do it differently now if you were in the same situation?*

In the same situation

*With the knowledge you have now?*

In the same situation now, er , assuming we were going to stop busses and trains, we, that might not be the choice, erm but assuming that was the choice, what would happen now is that we’d sit down together as a group, think through the consequences, rather than just jump on a bus, think through the consequences, er, think also of er we’d have some sort of legal advice or legal support, and er at least two of us would go on the same bus, you know, it wouldn’t be one isolated person, probably three, probably two doing the action, and maybe another two pretending to be passengers, and the pretend passengers would be hugely supportive, so we’d change, so that there’d be a completely different narrative than we had. Er, so it would be done very, very differently.

*Erm, so from that point on you must have learnt fairly quickly-*

Never to go on a number 38 bus again!

*Never to go on a number 38 bus again!*

Yes I did, I did [laughter]

*But I mean your approach to activism, did that, did it change, change, did it, did it feel like a fast learning curve?*

Yes. Fares Fair campaign and Can’t Pay Won’t Pay was a fast learning curve, not just in the terms of being active in the sense of direct action, but I was learning very quickly about, you know political structures, MPs to members of the greater London Authority, how you lobby them, how you speak to them, er learning a bit how you deal with the media, er and that was all, err, yes that was a steep learning curve, yes, as well as learning a bit about the transport stuff. Erm, so that all happened in the space of two or three years. And then what happened next was erm, something called Lambeth Public Transport Campaign was set up which came out of Fares Fair campaign. Er and it was set up by, partly by myself, and a couple of other people from the campaign. And the, greater London authority, who were going out of business, cos Thatcher abolished them if you remember, er, they were looking to spend money as quickly as possible before, er, she grabbed all the money as well, so they said to us, ‘well look, if your setting up a campaign, we’ll fund it’. Days have changed [laughter]. ‘We’ll fund it. We’ll fund an office, we’ll fund a worker’.

*Wow!*

I know, I know. Exactly. And so I became, it became a job share. And so I became a worker on something called Lambeth Public Transport Campaign, which them Lambeth Council took over the funding of it, it became Lambeth Public Transport Group, and essentially became a sort of campaigning watchdog group, to try and improve public transport for the people of Lambeth.

*Ok. And you were still there?*

I was, I was still there, and, and I did that, er for the next, as part of what I did, it was a job share, I did that for the next, er, 15 years.

*Wow.*

Er, but, but, out of that arose some of the anti-road stuff which kind of, eventually will lead us to the, to the M11 link road

*Eventually*

Yes, yes I know [laughter]. During the 1980’s there were, proposals emerged to erm, build a a, or widen roads right across London. A 12 billion pound program.

*And this was Thatcher, Thatcher’s-?*

Th, this was Thatcher years, er, er that’s right. It was a Conservative government program. Now groups began to spring up all over London, residents groups concerned they’re about to lose their homes, or er their parklands would be taken away, and I got involved with some of the Lambeth groups and eventually an organis-, it wasn’t an organisation, it was more a network or all the groups, but there were about 250 groups around London. And it was called Alarm, which stands for All London Against the Road building Network, and I, in addition to doing the Lambeth stuff part time I came to chair Alarm, er, er, which kind or brought all these groups together

*And, and, when, when was this now?*

This was

*I know I said dates didn’t matter but*

Erm, er no, this was probably 1985/86

*Yep, ok.*

And the campaign went on for, until the 1990’s. I’ll tell you a little bit more about what happened in 1990. Er but essentially we brought a little bit of a new approach, because, a number of the residents groups were very keen to say put the road somewhere else, and the richer they were the keener they were to put it to other areas. So Dulwich was very keen to put the road, to put the roads through Peckham and Brixton, er, because they claimed it would be good for the economy of Peckham and Brixton and bring jobs. So the fight was, the only golden rule that Alarm had was everybody fights all the roads, so let’s not put it somewhere else. And I suppose a secondary principle we had was to look at alternatives, and we saw public transport as, walking, cycling, as the alternatives to roads, and in this sense we were a, a little bit different from the battles against roads in the early 1970’s, which were against roads, but it was homes before roads. So they were saying build homes, don’t knock down homes, rather than concentrated on roads. No we said don’t build roads anywhere, but there is a transport alternative. And it was, it was a huge campaign, you know, tens of thousands of people across London involved, and eventually all the roads except two, which, which go to the M11, in 1990 just shortly before the local elections in London, the Conservative government was afraid it was going to lose local councils right across London because of the road building schemes, er they dropped all the road schemes. It took us back a little bit just how quickly they did that, but, but it was a significant success. Except two. And these were two that pre-dated the, the, this package of road schemes. One was the M11 link road, and other was the, er, became known as the Oxleas Wood Road, er er it was the bridge across east London going through Oxley’s Wood and erm. So those schemes remained. And, erm , the M11 people these were people like sister networks Leyton had become part of Alarm so, when we won in 1990 the battle continued on Oxleas Wood and M11, and it because part of something wider, a national body, which emerged called Alarm UK, er, which, because the government in 1989, it, er, wanted to build, er, what they describe as the er, proudly describe as the largest road building scheme since the Romans, and erm they erm er, this was new roads across the country, and kind or taking advice from Alarm London and modelling itself on Alarm London. Alarm UK er, developed with about 300 groups around the country, including the M11 link road group, and I came to chair alarm UK, and it was really, sort of wearing alarm UK hat, that in the early 1990s I got involved in the M11 link road campaign.

*Erm, that’s brilliant, and we’ll, and I’ll come to ask you more focused questions about the M11*

Yeah, yeah,

*In just a second*

Yeah sure

*But I’m interested in, I guess I’m interested in the politics of I guess Alarm as an umbrella group*

Yeah, yeah

*Erm, one thing that struck me when I was reading various articles about Alarm online was, just was how, sort of sort of a broad alliance of er people it entailed. So I just wonder if you could say a little bit about, about that.*

It, it, it was its strength, you know, it, it, it’s the broadness of the alliance, the diversity of the groups, was its strength. It also made it hugely difficult to, to, to keep together.

*Yeah*

Because, people were coming from, with a small p and a big p, different political backgrounds, different cultural backgrounds, some people were much more experienced than others, some people had different ideas of tactics, and that was probably the thing that was most problematic. We all knew where we were going, and once we’d all decided that we were, the thread that held us together was no new roads anywhere. That was a struggle to get there. But there were enormous differences in how to achieve it. From people who wanted to, who’s experience had been, to work inside track, to write letters, just to go and see MPs, I I don’t think anybody disagreed with that, that was part of it, er, but others were saying no you’ve got to be much bolder, it’s got to be street demonstrations, not direct action at this stage because the roads weren’t being build, but big sort of in your face demonstrations, er, some of the people, particularly those who were from the er, er, who were experienced in the Archway Road Campaign er, they, they were keen, very keen on erm personalising it so that they would er go and visit the minister who was involved, at his home

*Uhum*

Usually, preferably, in the early hours of the morning [laughter]. And others were saying no that’s not acceptable, an, and as I was sort of chairing the whole thing, to some extent coordinating it, perhaps my main role was to try and keep all these disparate people together, which we just about managed but

*But, but, how, how did you do that? Eem, what was your, what was your position to start with, and how do you even begin to mediate between that diversity*

I, I suppose my position, I came originally, as I said through the Lambeth groups, and how I came to coordinate it really or chair the meetings, was I think, the early meeting of the groups coming together were just er, er well they were out of control. Erm I mean there was one example of two women just chasing each other round the table because they disliked each other so much. Er er an and the poor person who was Charing was just ‘please sit down, please sit down, plea, don’t’ And the xxx were none of this please stuff [laughter] you know, they just looked at him and you know carried on round the table. And, and I think I was asked to chair one of the following meetings, and for one reason or another I was kind of able to hold it together. Why er, I don, must have been something to do with myself, but er er, and although I was coming from a kind of, definitely from a more radical side of things, I, I, I think I did see above all, that the importance was holding the network together. Cos I felt it was split up, if we split up, if we split up, er that just meant that er you know, the other side was going to, was going to make it much easier. Erm I suppose a lot of it was going in and talking to people outside meetings going to see them, going to speak at their own meetings, getting to know, critically getting to know them individually, er but, er not just me but small groups of campaigners getting to know other groups of campaigners, socially individually, it was, it was, it was very unstructured form of campaigning. I think some people were not terribly comfortable with it, er, but it was, ‘well lets meet for a coffee’ ‘let’s all go for a drink’ erm ‘let’s get to know each other’ er and, and that was, it was networking, it was the basis of it. And once people got to know each other, you know, they were less inclined, on the whole, to chase each other round the table. Sometimes they were more inclined [laughter] but on the whole they were less inclined. And erm er, so I think that was, It was that kind of, that was the approach. Erm yeah, it it’s, we’ll never know whether there might be people who will be much keener and much more structured approach with a hierarchy and with people having particular roles er, now, if they were keen on that they may just have decided not to get involved. You know, they may have just walked away, or never got engaged. Erm but, it was, it was a flatter, none of this was based on theory, it was, just happened, you know, I, I, I, there was no kind of, we, we were all learning, particularly me, as we were all going along. Erm, so it wasn’t any kind of great idea that there must be, you know con, you would now call consensus decision making or anything like that, it was, it was, it kind of just evolved

*But organically you were working with consensus*

That’s exactly what we were doing, that’s exactly what we were doing. We were organically working with consensus, b, b, building up a network, which, which didn’t have hierarchy, an and although I chaired the meetings, did a b, did a bit of the coordination it was all sort of very clear that I mustn’t become the one and only face of the network, I did a little bit of media, but others did it as well. Part of the reason for that, an and this probably was a little bit thought through was if there is one person heading it up, now that one person is discredited by the media or by the other side, and their head is chopped off as it were, then it leaves a headless organisation

*Yeah, that makes sense. And did you see, did you see your work as er political in the, in the broader sense or did you see it, was it purely environmental, or what did it feel like it was political with a kind of bigger P?*

No. It wasn’t political in the sense that it wasn’t overtly anti Thatcher and a lot of, of bodies at the time were. We could never have been that because we were bringing in community groups, individuals who would have been Thatcher supporters. So it wasn’t overtly political in that sense but yes, while it was largely environmental, I think I, I personally say it as community based as the communities fighting back. But we, we were political in the sense that we were involved in the political arena, that we were putting forward what we regarded as political public transport, and walking and cycling alternatives. So in that sense we were involved in politics but that not, we were very careful not to align ourselves to any political party. Er, I think for two reasons one: if you do that your fortunes ebb and flow with, with the fortunes of the political party, but secondly if your bringing together communities, your actually bringing together people of all principle persuasions.

*Absolutely. Erm, so how did- lets talk about the M11 a little bit- how did that erm, come into your awareness? How-*

Well that was part, that was part of one of the campaigns in Alarm. It was one of the few campaign that moved on to Alarm UK. Alarm UK was structured in very much the same way as Alarm was. By that stage perhaps we were more deliberately structuring it like that, er because we felt it had worked in London. The M11 became one of the big campaigns.

*Where were you living, sorry, at the time?*

I was still living in South London.

*Still living in South London.*

I didn’t move to Leytonstone until much, much later

*Ok, post M11*

Yeah, post M11. Ironically post M11, yeah, yeah. Urm, the, the, so yes. So, so M11 was, because it was so close to the bulldozers coming in it was you know one of the, and perhaps because it was in London, it was one of the kind of er top campaigns. But I, I think, just for me to understand the history of the M11, and actually the surprising nature of what happened there, er you have to go back a few years to Twyford Down

*Ok, great*

And, and, you know, that’s where the direct action exploded into er, into a real force. And I think it was local people working alongside direct action activists were, they lost Twyford Down but they became a force. The next, the next place here I think the government thought direct action would be big was in South East London through Ox-, the road through Oxleas Wood because it was ancient, it was pretty, it was a wood, it was famous, and that’s the reason why they dropped the road, because of the threat of the direct action from local people. What they never expected was that in an unfashionable part of urban North East London that direct action, and, and essentially relatively low income communities, would explode into such a protest

*Uhum*

They, they actually expected, I think, well I now know because they’ve told me subsequently, they, they, they, they, they now, they, they expected the M11 would generate isolate pockets of protest, that because it was unfashionable, it was North East London, it was loads of you know, low income communities and they decided it wouldn’t be fashionable for environmental activists because there was no hills or trees around, er, they’d be safe to go ahead. Er, so, erm, and initially we were involved in the early campaigns as the bulldozers were, were threatening, I’ve got to say, I felt, I felt they might have been right.

*Yeah, absolutely.*

Be- because, as you’ve probably heard from the M11 people, in the early days Richard Leyton and co., with a little bit of help from Alarm, as they were part of Alarm, there was only a small group of people, a small group of people who met in, in a a, in a church hall, and, and, it would have been almost inconceivable that in those early years, in the early 1990s that that small group of people would be involved in what turned out to be the longest, er, er, campaign, the longest period concentrated direct action that the UK has seen. Now-

*Does that remain true?*

I don’t know. It’s a great soundbite; I don’t know whether it remains true. [laughter] I hope it does. [laughter] On roads certainly, yes. Erm, I’m just not quite sure about other, you know some of the peace movements might have overtaken it. Erm, but certainly on roads, and you know, we felt, we, we looked at Twyford, we’d seen what happened in London, and we felt, this needed to become big. This needed to be getting everybody involved. But certainly in the early 1990s we never thought that would, we, we, we thought we were fighting a losing battle.

*So what was it, do you think that mobilised that extraordinary explosion in interest?*

It, it, it’s very hard to pinpoint it. I mean, what I think it was, is that a number of the people, the activists who had er cut their teeth at Twyford Down, it’s not quite as if they were-

*I’m just peeping to make sure the battery’s still fine*

Yeah, yeah, right going on forever, yes

*No, no, no, not at all. I’m just making sure that the battery, the batteries might need changing at some point, so I’ll keep looking down*

Ok. So, it’s a number of the activists who were at Twyford actually became quite interested in the demographics of the M11. You know, because although they were coming from an environmental perspective a number of them, not everybody, certainly not everybody, were purely green environmentalists. But a number of them also say hang on a minute, there's a social dimension to this.

*Yes absolutely*

You know, why should it be that low income communities are going to have this dreadful road imposed upon them. And so enough activists, enough to make a critical mass came and got involved in the M11. And then what happened, and I think what tends to happen with direct action is once a critical mass gets involved, and ideally with local residents, and starts making a little bit of a fuss so it becomes, gains a profile, that others pile in. And a lot of direct action is, I think, works on emotion. And that, that’s not a criticism that’s, you know, that’s a good thing, er, that’s what drives it. Er, er but its emotion very often rather than deeply thought out. And there was in the 1990’s the feeling, there were a lot of activists around, looking for the next site battle, and the M11 became the next site battle.

*And I suppose the, er vast number of empty houses*

And the vast number of empty houses, that’s right, the idea then of rather than defending a green open space as it was at Twyford Down was defending people’s houses, and when the activists got involved and met the residents, you met the dollies of this world. Then it became you know, something quite powerful.

*And do you think that actually shifted the narrative of the wider movement in some sense?*

Oh yes. Oh, oh significantly. I think the M11 did a number of things overall, although as we know, the road has been built, but I, I think it shifted the narrative of the wider direct action movement from simply being a green movement, to be you know a green movement that also had er, er deeper social roots. I think it did that and I think on the road building scheme of things it ensured that erm the M11 was effectively the last major urban road to be built in England. Er, Glasgow’s built some since, but er to be built in England, at et that time there were M11 type roads proposed in many cities in the country. They never happened, and I think people realised no longer can that happen because residents are going o be up in arms and they’re going to get backing of a wider activist movement. So I think the M11 had a significant effect on both those things, of moving things in a new direction.

*Em interesting. So Alarm, Alarm’s initial involvement was with the Richard Leyton’s of the area* *rather than with…….*

Yeah, Yeah Absolutely

*Rather than with the Earth First Donger types*

It, it, it was it was. It was kind of XXX. It was Alarm and Alarm UK was essentially the Richard Leyton’s type person initially .but at the very end of Alarm London, before 1990 erm the young founders of Earth First made contact so Alarm unlike a network rather than an organisation but unlike the kind of bigger NGOs, Greenpeace was always a part because they they do their own direct action., but unlike the others involved in road building like Friends of the Earth even, eh Campaign for Rural England RSVB none of them er embraced direct action. Friends of the Earth had a love/hate relationship with it and eventually embraced it but, but, they didn’t initially. .Eh although Alarm was probably rooted in the Richard Leyton type communities, what we did from almost day 1 was we embraced direct action and we embraced direct action activists. And during the 1990s there were Alarm UK but there was also Road Block, eh, no Road Alert, Road Alert and we worked very, we were sister organisations sister networks. Alarm UK was erm networking amongst the Richard Leyton type community groups and Road Alert was networking amongst the er Direct Action activists, but you know we were we were we worked together we did conferences together, we… and therefore it also meant that we er were very comfortable working together in somewhere like the M11 where the people merged almost as one.

*And did they merge almost as one? Did they*

To some extent but not entirely. Erm I, I think more at the M11 than anywhere else, erm but even people like Richard Leyton and most of the people in his group never quite took direct action. Some of them did, and as I say, more of them did than I think local residents elsewhere. Erm perhaps they felt they had given their, given their income levels they had less to lose, I don’t know.. but but...or perhaps they were of a more radical mind-set anyway. More of them merged but there still XXX and it spills onto the Heathrow stuff right now. There is still a bit a bit not of a division. They’re aiming for the same thing but there are, there are residents who are.. who are on the whole 90, .. 80, 90% wouldn’t think of taking direct action and 80, 90% of direct action activists believe that is the way forward.

*The only way forward?*

Erm, the only way forward for them. There are some direct action people, perhaps I think who were more in the early 1990s when it was becoming a newer sort of thing who felt that direct action was the only way forward. I think most now would accept it is it is not everybody but most would accept it works best when it’s complimentary to other forms to other forms of protest. Er and I think and I think that began to emerge in the M11 protest and in some of the other anti-road stuff in the1990s.I think both, both residents and er activists began to realise that the other was actually quite important to the wider struggle.

*So aside I mean from tactics there was sense of kind of animosity between the……*

No, no

*There was not was no sense of animosity between the…*

No, there was no sense of animosity…...In fact….in the M11 there was none at all there was a strong bond between local residents and the activists.

*And largely I suppose that must have been partly because eh residents that were not, that were less sympathetic took the money and left, so that the people who were remaining were…*

I, I think that is probably right. I, I think they took the money and left or other residents perhaps decided I don’t want to get involved in this sort of campaign and XXXX never know because XXXX never involved so never know what they would have done.

*But were there people still living on the roads then on Claremont Road on Coleville? Road in those rat roads ehm that were that remained but weren’t involved in the campaign?*

Not very…Latterly not very many. Most were involved.. er.. yeah I mean although it was a small group of kind of people that actually met with Richard Leyton and co.. erm the latent underlying support they had was quite large. Some I think most of those people living locally were involved in some way or another. Er …There would have been people who took the money and left there would have been people, particularly in Wanstead who just weren’t involved. There was very little local opposition to what was happening. [laughs] I know there was very little local opposition to what was happening. But there would be a lot of local people who didn’t get actively involved.

*Local opposition to what was happening in terms of the activists*

Yeah, yeah

*Rather than the road building?*

Yeah, yeah, yeah, that’s right. That’s right. That’s right. Erm so erm …..Yeah….I’m just thinking back probably ….there.. there was a merge, a merging certainly in.. in not necessarily what they did but in how they were thinking and in what they were……..the residents and the activists in the M11 which… was quite strong.Cos I can think of meetings em interminable meetings I’ve got to say in planning actions and you know everybody would sitting in a church hall or something on the floor and it would be a mix of residents and activists all aiming for the same thing. Erm even if some were going to be more er active than others …

*Do you know now we’re down to one bar of battery so just bear with me cos my paranoia is*

No no The meetings were very actively and deliberately erm the consensus style meetings and erm, where everybody was allowed to have their say about everything.

*Were you, were you chairing for a lot of these meetings?*

I chaired quite a lot of these meetings. Yes, erm and erm it was… I suppose ….a lot of them were about…planning actions …. And the actions were…you know this was quite …erm …risky stuff …and for that reason it was important that everybody felt…Comfortable, everybody had their say about whether they had …what they, what they were going to do … whether they had fears or concerns about it … so I, I think we all got that this had to happen.. er but they would sometimes go on for four or five hours.

*[Laughs]*

I know, I know. I have such a wonderful memory of the George pub in, in Wanstead because that was where after the meetings.. that’s.. I can run and escape to it

[*Laughs]*

Upstairs hidden away [Laugh]

*By yourself?*

By myself. I didn’t want to speak to anyone else.[Both laugh] So I have a wonderful memory of it..erm..it will go on for ever..and I mean ..there would be plenty…I think too much detail was planned at the meetings but there was a feeling at that stage, that everybody who was going to be involved in an action and sometimes that would be 50 to 100 people for the meetings were huge .. needed to be involved and buy into every detail of the action. I think possibly now that wouldn’t happen, you know, people would actually accept there might be sub groups who could decide on what sort of ladders needed to be built…to be bought.

*And is that.. do you think is that because …the activist movement has matured?*

Yeah, I think so, no I think so…cos I think everybody was learning and …and …it..it is matured and it’s it’s …that’s right.

*And is it… does its maturation also make it less idealistic.. or…..*  .

Not necessarily…eh..erm ..

*What’s the relationship between kind of idealism and pragmatism there?*

It .. if I compare it with what is happening with Heathrow…..

*Yeap*

And Plane Stupid at Heathrow. Erm…I think, I think someone at Plane Stupid has got the mix right, where, there’s…they’re doing it for idealistic reasons but actually are a little bit more pragmatic in how it’s done….erm.. so that people go off and… you know …make decisions on…on smaller matters that really.. Really other people accept that. Erm, I don’t whether its idealism, I think, some, some of the thinking at the M11 and round about that time, it wasn’t specific to the M11, maybe more, more fundamentalism than ide-, than just idealism, you know, there was this kind of fundamentalist streak that everybody had top make a decision about everything to prove that nobody was more important than anybody else, and that everybody had to have their say every meeting, it was, however ridiculous what they said might be, everything was taken at the same level

*And did you, did you subscribe to that belief at the time as well?*

No, no, not entirely. Not entirely/. I realised er, I, I, I, subscribed to the idea the y-, y-, you know, the consensuses, the non-hierarchy stuff, I subscribed to that, but not this, this fundamentalism stuff, I realised at that point in time that in order to progress this campaign that’s that what we had to do, and that’s what I’d do for 5 hours before I could escape to the George Pub. But I, but I saw that as something that I’ve sort of got to do, rather than, you know, subscribe to, and I didn’t, and I. I, I latterly, it’s further on, but latterly I got on much better with Plane Stupid because I, I, it was more focused. Er, yeah, so I think it has, there is a danger that if you loses, lose too much of that, yes you can become too professional, because I, I think one of the advantages of the activists is they, although activism is what they did, they were not in that sense professional campaigners

*In what sense? Let me understand*

In the sense of they weren’t [pause]

*Do you just mean that they weren’t payed?*

Sort of partly they weren’t payed, yes, yes, that’s right. So there is a danger if, if it becomes too much of a hierarchy it becomes too much like a professional organisation, you lose some of that idealisms, but I don’t think, that you can be a little bit more organised and together without losing that idealism

*And were there people that were very highly organised in the M11, or was it all-*

No, no there were. There were, and this is the interesting thing that although we had these long interminable meetings, what really happened between the meetings is certain people like Roger Geffen when you meet him, certain people like Roger Geffen actually because they were organised individuals, they actually made things happen. And I feel that although a lot of these non-hierarchical groups it’s a little, it doesn’t quite work out in practice, because what actually, if thing are going to happen, there aren’t people to make things happen. And, and, very often it tends to be the same people who make things happen because their sort of people who make things happen, and i think, I think that was very much a feature of the M11.

*Yeah.*

Yeah.

*Yeah that makes sense. And was everybody there, everybody at, kind of living on the site, were , was everybody involved, was everybody actually involved, or was there kind of a large section of people just really there for the free housing and the lenient liberal sort of attitudes [laughter]*

There, there

*Did everybody see themselves as in-*

No, no everyone, everyone didn’t see themselves as an activist there to stop the M11 link road. Everybody, whatever their motives of coming their though, everybody did take part in the activities to stop the road. So, so, people might have come because look, look this is a great place to smoke weed and nobody asks any questions, that was the [laughter] that may well have been their motivation for coming, but, but they nether the less played a role in stopping g the road. So And particularly in Claremont Road which became famous for its kind of liberal attitudes, in the final days when Claremont Road was being defended everybody would defend it in some way or another, so in that sense there were very few people I think, maybe one or two individuals, but very, very few who were actually there, you know, for a cultural experience, A, a, a, and would, and would disappear when action took place. That really wasn’t the case.

*And in terms of your involvement aside from obviously chairing Alarm and chairing lots of the meetings*

Yep

*I mean did you spend a lot of time on the, on the route*

I, I did spend a fair bit of time, cos, I mean, I was still working part time at Lambeth Public Transport Group which was useful cos that kept a bit of money coming in, erm but yes, I did spend a lot of time on the route and I actually , I took direct action. Er, er, I didn’t, I didn’t live there, I lived in South London, and, and, quite a lot of people didn’t necessarily live necessarily on Claremont Road, or on the site all the time. A few people did, but a lot of people would live there some of the time, but also live with their homes some of the time, and, and, kind of into the area. Now I didn’t really live there, partly because I was working in Lambeth, but I was up there a lot, yes. At, at the height, over that eighteen months I spent a huge of time up the M11 link road. Some, sometimes taking a bit of direct action, sometimes not, er, er eventually my role became more er more media, er because I was fairly comfortable doing the media, and a lot of the people really weren’t very comfortable doing the media, and also I think I was sort of trusted to, to put out the message that people wanted to be put out because there's a real danger if, if you’re a media spokesperson you say whatever you want to say yourself, er so eventually I became perhaps the media, one off the main media people. Er you know, I quite like doing media, I feel quite comfortable doing it, and people were fairly comfortable me doing it.

*Letting you do it.*

Eh?

*Letting you do it.*

Letting me do it. They let me do it. Partly because, yep, partly cos they felt I could do it, and partly cos a lot of the people just didn’t like doing it, you know, I was, I quite liked it, yeah, yeah.

*Erm and do you think the media erm, cos the impression I get is, what I’ve heard a lot of people say is that the media will latch onto the kind of, you know the scruffiest grubby, grubbiest, ugliest person so-*

Absolutely. Er th- the- that was, that was part of our challenge and a learning process of how to some extent, to manage the media, cos they, they, yes they-

*Cos it was a hugely successful media campaign*

It was. It was. It was, no, it was, and, and , and, that’s right, that’s right, cos day, we, we, high profile an an on the whole getting across our message, you know relatively sympathetic, you, you know week in week out we were getting top stories in, in papers like the independent, Observer and what have you. Front page stories often

*Uhum*

It helped because 300 people on the roof of a house that’s a nice story. But, but on the whole we, we, we were able, we thought fairly hard about how to project this in the media. Er, because otherwise there is a danger it could have been portrayed in a very, very different way. And, and it wasn’t. Er, er, and we did very deliberately think about well actually dolly’s up for this, little old ladies you know who’ve lived there all their lives and who are articulate, who look like little old ladies but don’t sound like them, you know perfect. A, A, so we very much, you know, Dolly’s an example, but we told th- Dolly to front up the story, we’ll tell Dolly’s story. Er, Richard Leyton and his mum- great story. And so you know we had those human interest, and we, an’ this, this was deliberate. I mean we probably learnt as we went along but it was also you know, fairly deliberate, you know, what, what story can we do. I mean the, one of the big days when there were 300 people on that roof, er, they probably told you about Wanstonia, you know we had an independent state of Wanstonia. Now that was deliberate and it also kind of worked, it brought a little bit of humour into the whole thing, and I remember doing something, going to studio LBC on a Saturday morning to talk, to talk about the independent state on Wanstonia an because it was slightly funny it actually you know one round an interviewer who might not otherwise have been terribly sympathetic.

*Um. So did you, do you get the sense that you had the support of the nation, or at least of the city? Did, did-*

We had, we had a sense, I don’t know about support, but we had a sense that we were making an impact, not initially, cos I said that earlier on, initially it was very, very hard, but once we got, once we began to build up the profile yes, we had a sense we were making an impact, and we also had a sense that there weren’t a huge number of people saying that’s dreadful, because what we were able to do was portray it as ordinary people losing their homes, er, for example, on one of the big days independent Wanstonia, the police there, and the journalists came out in large numbers and erm, there were a lot of activists on the roof, some of them looked, of whom looked very alternative, but the picture I, I was, I had to go to the media, now the picture I had was of one of the women who’d lived in the house for a long time. She, she was locked on to her washing machine in the basement

*With Rebecca?*

Was Rebecca, yes. Patsy and Rebecca that right

*Patsy and Rebecca yes*

Now the pic- Sun journalist was a typical, you know macho Sun journalist ‘any celebrities? Anybody nude?’ I said ‘no, no, you prob-‘ I said ‘If I’d known I’d have done a double whammy and brought a new celebrity, but no, no, we’ve got no new celebrities’ Shit, shit what am I going to do. And I produced this picture, I said ‘actually, what we’ve got is here, not upstairs, but underneath there's this woman locked on, here she is’. Well it, its, he said, I’m not making this up, he said ‘well it’d been better if she’d been in her underwear but…’ [Both laugh] I thought it’s a classic, you know, its classic [both laugh] ‘but no, no she’ll do, thank god she’s not a bloke, she’ll do’. Classic, classic, that’s exactly what he said, but in a sense, he couldn’t get a story of a new celebrity, he, he couldn’t get a story of, of violence, I mean if there had been violence from, because we’re largely non-violent, we, if violence had come in it would have been a very, very different situation, we would have well. But he couldn’t get violence, he couldn’t get a ruck as he called it, so he had to with, make do with Patsy locked onto the washing machine, you know, mum. And its exactly the sort of story we wanted, you know

*It’s a great story.*

That’s right, so we, we, we actively, worked really quite hard on the media stuff, and I think it probably came through that we actually on the whole got across certainly our narrative. Every single story? No. But broadly our narrative.

*I mean its striking now looking back those, those, personal stories, just so, so strong*

They’re so strong

*And they’re so strong because of the work you did at the time. I’m sure something-*

That, that’s right. That’s absolutely right, that’s rights, and people like, people like Dolly are still remembered-

*Absolutely*

You know, an, and, as who she was.

*[Pause] erm, what do you think about moving to that table? I’m just very aware of conversation. Is that- would you mind?*

Yes, yes, we’ll annoy, we’ll annoy somebody else

[Muffled talking and moving]

*Ok, we’re recording again*

Right

*Ok so we’d got to Dolly, to characters weren’t we*

You know the characters were critical. We just played up the, played up the characters, an and it’s just the classic thing of, we’d the human interest stories and we had to tell them. We told, I suppose we told a little bit also about the reasons about why a road would not work, you know, would generate traffic and all that, an so we backed that up a little, so it wasn’t just you know protest but actually what goes down well is the human interest stories, and we, we desperately needed them otherwise it would be you know ‘rabble on roof of house.

*Yeah, absolutely. And people like Dolly were willing and happy to have their stories-*

Oh more than happy. I mean we wouldn’t have done it if they hadn’t been-

*Of course*

Although we’d have tried very hard to persuade them truth be known. We weren’t that worthy, we’d have tried very to persuade them [laughter] They, they were happy to do it. An, and what also worked, I talked earlier about the local people and the activists, I think when people, when everybody saw how we were able to get across our message, activists there supporting local people, I think that helped, you know when, you know the, the bring people even closer together. People began to understand that they were important to each other.

*People, as in the activists and the residents?*

Yes, yeah, yeah, that’s-

*Started to?*

Yes, yes, that’s absolutely right. Because the residents kind of mentally understood it would never have been that process without the activists. And the activists began to understand that actually, they, they’re at their most effective when linked in with residents

*Yep, absolutely, absolutely. Erm, so, so help me get the various different kind of campaigns in order*

Yep

*So there was the Richard Leyton campaign which was essentially working against the erm, what was their*

There, there was a No M11 group of everybody eventually. Three was, there was the No M11 Link Road campaign, that’s who they were, now they, yeah, so they’d been around, I’m not quite sure when Richard, when Richard got involved, but they were around certainly in the 1980s erm, an and they were representing residents whose homes would get knocked down or would live very close to the M11.

*And there was a public enquiry that they were, what was*

There was the public enquiry. There had been an earl-, before any of us had been involved they’d been an earlier public enquiry I think, er where I think very different sort of residents had put forward an alternative road scheme.

*Yeah*

Now, I don’t know very much about this but this, this, this was, I’m not sure the dates now, but this might have been late 70s early 80s, when an alternative road scheme was put forward, but the campaigning was very different

*And was that, was this the cut and cover*

That was, no I think this was something completely different, or a different alignment. I think they were actually, yeah, I think it was saying the A10 or something er, I can’t, I don’t know the details, but, but it was a different kind, it was a more traditional sort of campaign. It was go to public enquiry, put forward an alternative scheme, try and persuade the inspector without any of the wider campaigning around it. Er it clearly didn’t succeed, and I think they sort of disappeared from the scheme, and then Richard Leyton’s people came in in the 1980s and the threat became really quite real to homes and to communities. Erm [pause] yes, just trying to think, get this in my head, that, that’s right.

*And they and Richard Leyton’s lot, that’s just kind of becoming a banner term-*

It is it is

*Joined, joined Alarm? They, they approached you as opposed to you approaching them-*

They, they approached us, in, in, in Alarm London, that’s right. They approached, and they became part of Alarm London. But then because their scheme was still going on they because an early, early, didn’t really have members but, er, er an early group that was part of Alarm UK. Er, so yes, they approached us, an, and what Alarm London did was to some extent we helped, we did brief XXX on how to campaign, how to deal with the media, er and we would go and see people and so on, so, so and I used to go on a regular basis then to their, to their meetings.

*As a representative of Alarm?*

As a representative of Alarm, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yep.

*Then, so the Earth First lot Dongas all of that those people, they came in later-*

They came in later, there was a little bit of, there had been some contact before Twyford Down, particularly with Earth First, with a guy called Jason Torrance erm, he and, it’s quite a good story, but it’s another story, so I won’t go into it [laughs]

*Oh, really*

Yeah, well, he and, he, Earth First in the, in the states by then had been going for a long time. Now there hadn’t been an Earth First in, in Britain by 1988 maybe 89, this young guy, very young guy, maybe 18, turned up in an Alarm London meeting, and he was from Hastings and he and his school friend from Hastings set up Earth First UK and so they came and they wanted to get involved in the anti-road stuff, so this kind of preceded Twyford Down.

*Ok*

So before the Dongas and before the activists got involved Jason and a few other direct action people were looking for, were thinking about direct action er on road building and I think they did bits and pieces which weren’t high profile and weren’t terribly successful. So, so we had established links with Earth First, erm so sort of prior to the Dongas and prior to the Twyford Down, but er, and I think Jason probably he got involved a little bit with Richard Leyton, er in the early days, but, but essentially your right, it was, it was post Tywford Down that the direct action activists really came into the M11 link road.

*Umm, ok. Erm I keep having, I keep having erm, figuring out what my next question is and then getting carried up, carried away with the story and forgetting where I was going, where I was getting with something. Erm, I want, I do, relatively soon I’m going to start to ask you about how it, how it kind of, back to your activist career, and moving on towards aviation protests because that was the next thing*

That was the next thing.

*I’m just really, I just want to be really kind of clear that the, the first big environmental movement really in the UK was the roads. The first kind of radical direct action was, the roads was kind of the genesis of that. Is that right?*

The, the roads was the genesis of i. Yes. There's always been I suppose CND and the peace movement, had, had take-, they’d, they’d had a history of civil disobedience, erm, it was slightly different though cos it wasn’t kind of rooted in local communities, but, but, there was, there was that civil disobedience heart, but that apart, the first kind of, yes the genesis of direct action activities that we now know, er were rooted in the anti-roads movement. There, there were really erm I mean Alarm London was radical in a sense but it didn’t need to take direct action cos roads schemes were dropped, but the so called anti roads movements of the 1990s it was the genesis of what we now see, of the direct action movement.

*Will you just, I’m going o just, get a note, get a bit of note paper that I can scribble while you’re talking*

Right, right

*Because I keep, things keep coming into my heads but I forget*

Ok, ok.

*Erm, erm so yes, so, so carry on*

So, have you got a, do you want a pen, are you alright?

*I’ve got one right there, and here’s yours, thank you.*

Yeah so, and that’s why I keep referring to the learning process, because it was a learning process for everybody. Erm, so, so there was the direct action, and I think, I, people have often asked me why the direct action movement started on roads and why it was started on roads only in the UK, because it wasn’t happening in other parts of Europe. I, I think it started on roads simply because I think at that point in time road building was seen as perhaps the biggest environmental threat, and this was sort of before climate change, this was you know destruction of the countryside, air pollution, noise, all the rest of it, it is a bit, I think that’s why. And people have speculated about why it was happening in the UK, was because, was possibly linked to erm the policies of the Thatcher government, where a lot of young people felt disposed, others have also said that possibly also the middle classes felt less secure than they had done before, because previously when you went into a middle class occupational profession you were kind of there for life. Now Thatcher shook all that around, so, the thinking, and I’ve no idea whether this is right or not, but the thinking was that there were a lot of people who were feeling a little bit further outside the system than they previously had been, and this wasn’t replicated in quite the same way in other European countries.

*What, what was the equivalent in other European countries? At that kind of time*

Well, I’m not sure there was one.

*Ok. What was the equivalent in the States, what was going on in Earth First in the States for example.*

Earth First there was stuff going on there, it was much more violent

*Yeah, that’s-*

There was direct action, you know, to preserve the wilderness or what have you, but it, it, it was violent direct action which wasn’t replicated on the whole here, and certainly Earth First here was non violent

*And what was, what was erm violent, specifically what was happening in the States*

Well in was violent in the States, it was, it wasn’t just, I think actually there was violence against people, but the, there was certainly er headquarters of companies were blown up and this sort of thing, so you know, it was big stuff. Now the French have always had a history of direct action, French farmers forever blocking here there and everywhere, and that was, that was continuing. But there wasn’t anything quite like, and the Germans have also taken it, but at, at that time there was no equivalent to the anti-roads movement in the rest of Europe

*Ok. Ok so it was, it was a really, it was a very kind of UK centric*

It was UK, centric, it was UK centric, yeah. I think that’s right, I think that’s right.

*And in terms of, I was reading, when I was reading the articles about your career earlier on-*

Oh dear

*I was struck by erm how you’ve kind of been in this continuing battle with the department of transport for like the last 30 years or something*

Absolutely

*How kind of personal has that got, does, has that*

It, it, it’s changed. I think it’s changed over the years. Erm, erm, I think they, I think the department of transport have possibly also changed over the years. Erm its, yes, I, I, there was I mean during the anti-road stuff, the was no erm and also in the early years, I did the third runway for Heathrow last time round, you know, there was no, we were on our different sides, we were enemies

*Uhum*

They had no desire to speak to me, and I really had nothing to say to them. Er now. I think there have been changes within the department for transport, I think both on roads and on airports to some extent. I think for two reasons one is, certainly on roads, the department have lost a lot of, were the big losers in the anti-roads movement, and although some roads are coming back its nothing like the same scale as before, I think also there's a new generation of civil servants emerging in the department, a younger generation who are, who are more aware of environmental issues, er who realised either they want to build roads and runways, er mitigation has got to central to it. They’re also possibly more aware that they’ve got to try and engage without, with-, with-, with er certainly an older generation we’re simply branded the opponents, they now call them stakeholders. And, and [laughs] I know that made me just giggle, I don’t know. But I think a new generation realised they’ve got to engage, and I think a lot of them are more, are more XXX to engage. So in that sense I engage more with the department now than I would have done ten years ago.

*And, and willingly, not just pragmatically? Or, or-*

Both, both. Yeah both, yeah

*And something else he said, I feel like I’m cheating having read these articles*

It’s alright, it’s alright, its ok, its ok. It’s called good research [both laugh]

*But something else that you said that’s truck me as interesting was you engagement with activism has turned you into a nastier person [laughs]*

I did say that, I did say that

*Or something, you said something along those lines, that you, that its jaded you, and I just, I found that really interesting*

Yeah, I mean, I remember saying that and thinking afterwards, do I really mean those things? But to some extent possibly yes. Yes, I think certainly a more cynical person, perhaps a more realistic person. I don’t know. But certainly going back to Fares Fair and stopping busses in the 1980s, erm I yes, I, I’m probably. Whether I’m less idealistic, I don’t know, but I, I am more cynical about things yeah, and about people than I was then. An’ and part of that is as a result of campaigning, and seeing peoples and authorities reactions to the campaigns. I think that’s probably right.

*Because I mean the first thing that you said was what got you involved initially was, was to do with corruption so-*

It, it was, but yes it was your absolutely right, that’s a very good point, and, and erm. Whether [pause] erm. That’s set me thinking, that’s set me thinking. But clearly my attitude towards that at the time was different to what my attitude might be now.

*Can you say anything more about that, how-*

I, I probably can if I think about it tonight but- [both laugh] but it, its, yeah, I think maybe, obviously older, maybe I’m just, maybe just more cynical about how things happen. I clearly got annoyed about that, but whether it was much more than simply getting angry about something that I thought was er wrong I’m not sure. It was certainly that. But I was less cynical, er, and possibly less cynical about peoples motives. Perhaps that’s what’s made me nastier, I, I, I I’m much more doubtful about peoples motives.

*And nasty is an interesting word*

It is, it is, I’m not sure I

*I don’t know if that was your word or mine*

No, no it was my word. And I remember using it in an interview and afterwards thinking do I really mean that? Er, and on reflection maybe it wasn’t the right word.

*So what is the right, cyn-, cynical-*

Cynical is probably the right word, yeah, yeah. Yeah that’s probably the better way. If I was giving an interview now that’s probably what I would’ve used. Nasty’s the one that stands out, it’s much worse

*Well it’s a good-*

It’s a much sexier word to use than cynical [laughs]

*It’s your innate media head*

Yes exactly. Indeed, indeed

*Storyteller*

Storyteller, yes that’s right, that’s absolutely right

*Erm so after the roads, what was, I mean there's you, your career that I’m interested in and there's also kind of just the direction that environmentalism*

To some extent, yeah to some extent they were together for a while, and then I think they might have diverged and come together again. I think after the roads, on the activism, I think something very interesting happened, I think with the direct action on the roads, it was, it was, there was something very focused about stopping the roads. Once the roads were sort of stopped then I think direct action activism lost its way a bit

*Ok*

It didn’t have a focus. It, it moved into Reclaim the Streets a bit, and that was an obvious thing to do. I know reclaim the streets was more than just transport but essentially part of it was transport. So you stopped roads to try and reclaim the street from cars and that was a very logical move. And I was kind of to some extent part of that. Er, I went onto airports where I’ll come to in a minute. And, but then what happened with the direct action movement it became much wider, you know, it became linked into the wider anti-capitalist movement, er there was almost an element of anti-capitalism in it. Erm, my view is it lost its focus. This is not, this is not a kind of comment from me on capitalism or anti-capitalism its simply I think the direct action movement. Didn’t have any focus because I’m not sure you can simply take direct action against capitalism. You know, you can take direct action against particular aspect s of it but I think there was a view you could take it against capitalism, and as a result it went nowhere and actually fizzled out. It didn’t come back in my view until it became a focused campaign again. The focused campaign was probably erm GM foods. So it came back in

*And that was like late 90s? Is that is heyday?*

That was [pause even, even later I think

*Early 2000s*

I think it was early 2000, 2001. Yeah I think so. Now, and again, and again there was an element of fighting large multi-national companies there was an element of anti-capitalism but it had a focus GM.

*Something tangible to fight against*

Something tangible. And I think you can, you can use. In my view direct action works when there's something tangible. Be it the apartheid in South Africa or civil rights in America, they were fighting something tangible. And again, then it came back again with the airport stuff, some of the GM people came onto the airport stuff, but on the whole it was new people, because erm climate change was the focus now er for the activists. But again there was something specific to fight so

*So, sorry, no go*

No go, go, go, go. Go on go on

*No, no*

No because I could go on forever

*No I want you to go on forever*

[Both laughing] no, no, no, no. Five, five hours later, you’ll also find that George Pub very attractive in Wanstead

*Erm, no you say, you say what you were saying*

So I think direct action there has been a, it disappeared for a while, it lost its way. Very interested to speak to Roger Geffen about this because he got involved and then er he got involved in the anti-capitalist stuff and I think got quite heavily involved, and I think speak to him, about it because he he’ll also recognise it lost its way. Erm now to some extent my, I was sort of part of that but not because we took a very clear decision in about 1997 to actually stop Alarm UK cos we felt we had not stopped every road, or been part of stopping every road, that actually almost a super tanker of roadbuilding was moving in another direction. And there's a real danger, as somebody though, we’re going to stop it right now partly because it’s a good story, it’s a success story at, at that time, but also there's just a danger that organisations hang, or networks hang on until there's just three of you upstairs in the back of a pub, you know, pretending your still, you know, Alarm UK. There's no purpose so we stopped it. Now I think my, my, my own feeling then was of relief. Long intense campaigns for many years, I think I want to move on, not necessarily out of the world of the small p politics, but from this er fairly intense campaigning. But then [laughs] the aircraft, aircraft noise became a big problem in London, big problem, flight paths were changed, you know, big problem in South London where it hadn’t been before. And people said to me ‘It’s a problem John. You know about this sort thing’ so I said ‘I know about campaigning’. We need a campaign now, I’ve got to say, although I realised I knew very little about airports, virtually nothing about airports or aviation my initial though was do I really want to do all this sort of campaigning all over again. Thought about this in Scotland for at least two months, do I really want to do it? I though no, no I don’t want to do this. Came back and you know, partly personally I suppose aircraft noise was a problem for me, if it hadn’t been I’m just not quite sure I, what I’d be doing. So it’s partly there was that and there was also well yes I do know what a campaigns about, you know, I’ve done it before. So that’s how I got into the airport campaigning. Er so it was really to do with the aircraft noise and then a few years later the plans for a third runway emerged and to be quite honest fairly, I suppose with my eyes open fairly systematically you know I tried to replicate in the airport stuff what we’d done in the ant-roads movement. So we have a, a, a, a national network called airport watch, which I was kind of instrumental in getting together, it’s very like Alarm UK, it’s a network etc. etc. And although I’ve been coordinating it, I chaired it for some time and er HACAN which is the Heathrow group er its it, it’s like a regional campaign group and again, and although there's a little bit more hierarchical and its committees and all that sort of thing erm it, its style of the campaigning we used in the third runway campaign was er, with other organisations, networking, coalition, bringing together er local people, organisations like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth, direct action activists

*Like Plane Stupid*

Like Plane Stupid. And deliberately going out to search for Plane Stupid. You know, I didn’t dream up the name, I’m, I’m, I’m terribly jealous it’s the most wonderful name in the world.

*It’s a very good name*

It’s a great name. But, you know actively bringing that together. So I suppose my bit in aviation which I never thought would last very long is, is, really, it’s less, it’s a bit of a learning curve, but less of a learning curve, because I’m applying the lessons of the anti-road stuff

*Uhum, uhum*

And, and a XXX of direct action which I suppose went into a dip and then came out again. I suppose when I was involved in the anti-road stuff and then closely involved with Plane Stupid, not so much taking direct action this time, but involved behind the scenes

*And you weren’t so involved in the GM stuff?*

No. Er, I don’t know why, er I wasn’t involved at all. Er its partly I suppose I was getting involved in airports, it may also be that, you know, based in London, it didn’t impact not just myself, but the whole issue didn’t impact on London, in, in the way it impacted on other areas. Yeah, it, it, it just didn’t come into my radar in any shape or form.

*And how about erm, how about climate camp and that whole bit-*

Oh, yes, that emerged

*Of the story*

Well this is very interesting, See, see, climate camp is a direct er child of the anti-roads movement. Er, one of the people you may be speaking to is Paul XXX er, if you can do speak to him

I’ve emailed him

Oh if you can follow him up because he’s a little bit erm, he’s a lovely, lovely guy, but erm he’s a bit laid back and he won’t take any offence if you push him

*Ok, I’ll push him*

Yeah, push him, er now he was heavily involved as an activist in the M11 link road, then he, actually it’s a really interesting story, because he’ll tell you himself that he and very little formal education, but part of his involvement in the M11 he though actually I could do more that this, I could get educated so he went, he went, a paid himself through college and university and what have you, then went to work for Greenpeace, but erm, shortly after Plane Stupid had been formed an the aviation or the runways were threatening Paul, Paul came to see me and said look, I’ve got this idea john and I want to run it past you, it may be a mad idea, in which case you’re the right person to tell me. And he said I think we should have a camp outside power station Drax, and initially I said Paul, your mad, your having people and, are you telling me your having people in a tent in a field in the middle of the north of England in a place nobody can get to and are you, are you even going to change anything. He said well I this, I think activist need to be brought together again, because the activist movement apart from the GMs had sort of gone, they need to be brought together again. And he said his sense is the issue is climate change, he’s passion to some extent was climate change, and he said Drax, I’d barely heard of I have to say, he said Drax is a great emitter of CO2 emissions, it’s the perfect place. Paul, I’m really not sure. In fact I’m perfectly certain that’s not the perfect place

*Why, and what were your reservations*

Well, just that, I just felt that in this first, I thought a power station, I suppose this is me have worked with linking, helping to link local communities and activist, I thought where is the local interest in a power station, and who cares two figs about a power station

*And coal as well*

And coal. And really in a place where no one’s heard of. Somewhere near Selby in Yorkshire, who’s heard of Selby in Yorkshire? Unless you come from Selby in Yorkshire. I though this is just going to die a death, it’s going to look ridiculous, it’s bound to be rainy and there’ll just be a handful of activists, and it will just be depressing for everybody and demotivating. And, and that was, I was proved entirely and completely wrong, utterly wrong. And And er Paul was right, he, he had pinpointed something that activists wanted to get together, and they wanted to get together on climate change, and people went in large numbers. And Io even went to Drax

*I even went to Drax*

You even went to Drax [both laugh]. And, and, and, I didn’t actually stay, it wasn’t because I was trying to XXX for other reasons I could only go up for a day. Erm but it was, the reason I went up was to try and, Plane Stupid had sort of started with only a handful of us, and again it’s the link, Jason Torrance who was Earth First, I said to him when I was starting off the airport stuff ‘you know, the direct action elements missing’. And er

*From Plane Stupid?*

Plane Stupid hadn’t started. From, from sort of, from the airport campaign

*From the airport campaign. Ok yeah*

There, there needs to be. ‘Well look’ he said, ‘there's two young guys who I know through Greenpeace, an and he’s doing an anti-roads conference’ or maybe not anti-roads, but some sort of conference, and there’ll be activists there, why don’t you come and meet them, er cos there interested in climate change, they’re interested in direct action, they may be interested in airports.’ So I went and met them, two guys called Joss Garman and Rich, Richard erm, I did remember his second name on the day I met him so that was fine. Er and, and they were very interested. So really the three of us, plus another guy called Graham Thompson were, were the nucleus of Plane Stupid

*Ok*

But we hadn’t got any activists, and Jonathan and I said well, look if we can’t recruit activists at somewhere like Climate Camp at Drax, then there's no future for Plane Stupid, there’s no future for direct action in aviation. So that was my reason for going to Drax and erm, er we, we did a workshop there and for the first 10 minutes if you do a workshop in Climate Camp you, they don’t always start on time, but after 10 minutes you go well hang on a minute, this is late even for activists. And er, after 15 minutes more people came in and that was really the beginnings of Plane Stupid. So, so there are links here between people who were involved in the anti-roads movement and who are kind of the main people behind, thinking up the idea of Drax and er, starting the whole, the whole Plane Stupid notion.

*Uhum, uhum, uhum*

Er, yep so climate camp actually became hugely important in the aviation, it became hugely important generally, in the in the fight against climate change, but for, for the Heathrow campaign, when Plane, Plane stupid actively lobbied, as much as you can lobby in the activist movement, people pretend they don’t, you know, you pretend you don’t, you pretend you sit round for 5 hour meetings and all come to a consensus, but actually Plane Stupid lobbied very hard for the 2007 climate camp to come to Heathrow because it would be, it would be critical in the fight against er the expansion movement of Heathrow. And I think it proved so. Erm, I saw very, as you probably know

*Would you like more water?*

No I’m fine. If, if you’ve read about me, as you probably know I saw very little of the climate camp at Heathrow because I was, there was an injunction.

*Yes, yes*

Yes, and although I could go to the climate camp, and certain prescribed areas, and I could talk to people, and even give speeches, I could talk about direct action or civil disobedience. So you know, it’s all a bit. So, but, but, but actually they played wonderfully into our hands, this, this injunction thing. First of all they tried to injunct all these respectable organisations like RSPB and CPRE and you know, we were sitting in the court, the high courts, the high court of justice, and although it was a little bit nerve wracking because particularly HACAN were injuncted, and they could lose all their resources, it was a little bit nerve wracking, but nether the less, the nation’s press were there, what an opportunity, you know, no press release can do this *[laughs]*. Here we were, Plane Stupid, Heathrow Campaign, the centre of their daily activities, you know, we meant to send a letter of thanks to Heathrow airport for, for you know, for giving us such good publicity. Er so, so climate camp did play a hugely important role, and, and in many ways, it, it was the child of the anti-roads movement

*I, I mean tell me, it was the child of the anti-roads movement and in this sense it was the parent of Plane Stupid*

And in a sense was the parent of Plane Stupid

*Or a kind of parent*

Yes, yes that’s right

*And just in terms of the anti-capitalist movement I’ve always had a, had the impression that erm, climate camp was quite explicitly ant-capitalist*

It, it was it was

*So just how did that kind of tie in, the ant-capitalism, the environmentalism, can you just*

It, it was explicitly anti-capitalism that’s right

*And do you think that was successful in that instance or did that feed into losing its way or*

No I don’t think it

*Can you just talk-*

No, but yeah, it was, it, what the anti-capitalist bit gave there was a quite a strong critique of what was happening in society and it, an in the, and in the environmental movement in environmental campaigning. So there was, there was an underlying critique there, but I think by this stage it, it, it wasn’t you know, it didn’t have to be er adhere to all the anti-capitalism critique in order to climb over the style and get into the field you know, you could be, you could be an environmentalist towards an anti-capitalist, but I, but I think it did give a useful basis to the whole thing er, but, but I think didn’t disappear like previously because there was a focus. And I think while the critique might have been for many anti-capitalists the focus was climate. And within that focus there were particular campaigns, perhaps the aviat-, well I think they were, well I think there were at the Drax campaign, the Kings North Campaign, the Heathrow campaign, were specific campaign where I think direct action could work, er, er and that where it differed from the anti-capitalism post anti-roads movement where there were no, where it was just vague and you know were taking direct action against capitalism, and I just don’t

*What does that mean?*

What does that mean, but it meant something, for people taking direct action against Kings North whether they anti-capitalist or whether they were simply environmentalist they both had a focus in which they could come together. And that was powerful, and that worked. And erm in Heathrow in particular there was added to support, as least tacit support and occasionally active support from the local community, which I think made it really quite a powerful tool.

*And, and so tell me about, tell me about Heathrow now. Where, where is Heathrow now, where is Heathrow’s campaign now*

[Both laugh]. Heathrow unfortunately is still there with, with two noisy runways [laughs]

*And who, and who are the players in the campaign at the moment. Plane Stupid very much so*

Plane Stupid very much so still. Plane Stupid and

*Airport Watch*

Airport Watch er and whats happening again is we’re building er very consciously the coalition that we built last time round. And so it’s bringing together local residents, Plane Stupid Activists, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth are coming in to some extent as well, er er some supportive politicians

*On the left and the right?*

On the left and the right. Yeah, this is the interesting thing. Er John McDonnell of course is on the left and Zac Goldsmith who’s er maybe a maverick on the right. They are the best of mates

*Oh really!*

They are the best of mates. It’s quite extraordinary. And I had a meeting with both of them recently and initially I wanted to go and see John McDonnell and John said I think we can bring in Zac can’t we, I said that that’s fine, I can kill two meetings with you know one stone, and so er, er Zac was sitting there as John hadn’t arrived, and when John arrived big hug for Zac [laughs] I thought this is so spec- Its partly cos they’re both mavericks, and they both have the stand, on the left and on the right, you know, so it’s all, it’s coming together again. But what is interesting is last time round we were fighting the third runway it took a long time, years to build up the coalition, you know to go to Drax, and, and to build up the wider coalition. This time round, it happening, it’s just happening because everyone knows what happened last time round, a lot of the same players, or the same organisation er, and as you know the government announced yesterday its postponing er a decision on the third runway, partly because you know Zac playing a blinder in standing for mayor, you know threatening. But it also because, you know, the coalitions there again. And if the government does go in, tries to go in on a third runway I think it would be much the same as before

*Do you?*

There's a caveat to that. Er quite a big one, is that Heathrow and the government are much cleverer this time round. Heathrow didn- as any large corporation who rarely loses, they normally expect they almost expect they can, in their case literally, bulldoze their way to victory. Er it’s only once they lose that they’ve got to reassess their, their position and their tactics and aviation see have done that. And this time round Heathrow are offering many more goodies to local communities. People who lose their homes, they’ll be offered, I use the word, the local people don’t like the word generous, but in some ways it is, a relatively generous package if your losing your homes.

*Uhum uhum*

A lot, a lot of people will be tempted. Particularly if their living in, as many of them are, in low income areas. They are offering er, probably they’ll offer an end to nights, breaks from the noise. Whether all that is enough, to dilute the local opposition, I don’t know. Only time will tell.

*And is it, are they promises that will be adhered to, do you think?*

That is, that is the big reason why the local community may not fall for them. Because although I personally think that Heathrow probably have learnt their lessons they’ve got to keep to the promises. Most people look back and think they’ve, they’ve lied for 20 years and therefore we don’t believe them now. Now, I, I think there is a bit like the DFT there is a more progressive people who’ve been given ahead within Heathrow, because last time round they lost and people, you, you, you know, I actually knew some of the people because they came out of the environmental movement, er, er and were working for Heathrow, maybe on the sustainability side. It’s rather odd. It’s very odd. They, they would regard themselves, whether the world regards them as progressive or not’s another matter, but they certainly see them, themselves as progressive politically and environmentally, and they have been given ahead in a way they never would have been given if they hadn’t lost the, lost the last time round. So I think probably they believe that they will keep their promises. Whether anybody else believes that I’m not, could be the reason why it won’t get the third runway. So it, it is a changed situation a little bit, it’s also I think, a problem of weariness, have people got the appetite to fight a third runway for another 8 years?

*Have you got the appetite to fight the third runway for another 8 years?*

That’s a question I’ve asked myself perhaps, I don’t know is the answer. It, it’s not an appealing prospect. Er, er and 100% honest perhaps I’ve got less of an appetite than some of the other p[people who’ve been less heavily involved because you know third runway more so I think than the anti-roads stuff because it’s gone on for so long has probably taken more of a toll on my, on my energies. Er than, than it did previously. Er and I look ahead and I think do I, have I really got the energy, have I really got the appetite? Have I really got the drive to make that happen a second time? The answer is I really don’t know. And but, its, it’s interesting, worrying that I’m asking these questions now that I wouldn’t have been asking 10 years ago. 10 years ago, ‘course we’re gonna stop this, where gonna do what we’re gonna do and you know, and even go to XXX and Drax and Climate Camp to find activists. ‘Course we’re gonna do this, sit on straw bales of course, you know and erm, the question suddenly arise, I mean asking these questions is evidence I’m in a different place than I was 10 years ago.

*And is that personally, or is it, is it political*

It, it’s both

*Is it*

It’s both. It, it, its personal in the sense that I am you know I’m older, I I’ve done this sort for a long, long time do I really want, have I really got the energy to do it again? I don’t know, I may have. Putting the, when it comes to a battle you, you know, the old adrenaline might be there. Er but er so it’s so in that sense it’s personal. The political one is the more interesting one. Er I and I said before there are changes with the Department for Transport, there are changes with the aviation industry. Er I’m not at the stage where I think we could do deals with them. Er, much as would love, much as they have been trying to woo me.

*Uhum, uhum*

It’s me in particular. Over the last few years, er to try and say look, we can all work together. I don’t really think we can. But there must be those, but there's options there, certainly that may exist now, that certainly didn’t exist before. But that’s a very hard one for me, I often think to myself, that I have to be very wary of- Its alright, we can go on for another 15 minutes at least. The, the, er what I have to be aware of is because personally there sort of doing the battle again is, and asking questions about them, I have to be very careful that that doesn’t influence my thinking, say, actually I don’t believe all that you saying, but am I going to cut you some straws. Er actu-, actually there going to provide something better this time. Now, if I’m perfectly honest, and this is not something that I say to campaigners, or publicly, but if, if I’m perfectly honest, I have to be very aware that I don’t use my personal-. If I’m weary of campaigning rather than trying to think of, oh there's something, there's something they’re offering us we can get hold of, you know getting to that place, maybe I’d better just withdraw from the campaign. And let others, you know, take it up. Very different place, but you know that’s probably an honest assessment of where I’m at.

*That’s very reflective.*

[laughs] it is reflective, yeah

*It is really interesting to hear it sounds like you’re at a real kind of juncture*

It, it, its, yeah, it’s probably not quite a juncture because I think you know, at the moment I’m on the situation where I’m fighting the third runway to Heathrow, I’m continuing to fight that, I’m continuing to build up coalitions, I’ve been to Plane Stupid meetings, I’m behind some of the actions though I don’t take them at the moment, er but that junct-, but I think your right that juncture could come. And er that would be er, I’m not looking forward to it.

*Because?*

Because I, I’m, I, because potentially there are two decisions and neither of which I want to take. One is, do I really, am I really looking forward to another 10 years of campaigning? If not I don’t want to take that decision. And the other decisions even worse. Is there a way out for me, buy saying to people well look you may be offered something here which is acceptable? And that would be a whole negation of everything that I’ve done over the last 30 years. In a way, we’re not there yet, but I can see if I look, I can see that juncture and it’s not it’s that- it’s there are two roads neither of which you really fancy going down. That’s the difficult bit. But who knows, it may never get to that

*Are there other, I’m hearing a lot that your committed to ultimately to a non-hierarchical-*

Yep

*Process, and I think that’s really clear, but it its clear also that you hold an enormous amount of responsibility, and are there other people that will take the mantra-*

Yep, yep, that’s-

*Or that baton*

That’s, that’s what I’ve been asking myself over the last little while. Erm , I would have th-, I, I think it’s more likely now because I think what’s happened is a lot of people who have gone through this campaign, they’ve see what happened and I suspect people would emerge. Er,

*But your not at the point of being able to make-*

No

*I’m not asking you to name names but even your head-*

No, no, but in my head, in my head, that’s absolutely right. Now there may well be an argument that possibly I should never have got myself in this position, but we are where we are. Erm but my instinct is if I were to er, I was going to say fall under a bus but maybe run under a plane, no, the way to go would be to run under a plane taking direct action *[laughs]* But I don’t know, but there all problems to solve, an obituary’s the right one, but er the, but if I was to run under a bus tomorrow my, my instinct would be that a campaign, a successful campaign would be formed to stop the third runway at Heathrow. I think in my heart of hearts I don’t think its XXX, and I think the people are all there. Erm but who knows. It’s the, it’s the uncertain teacher

*[Laughs]. And we’re back, I’m just going to ask you one more time what your life looks like without activism, sort of I asked you that right at the beginning-*

You did

*And I’ll ask you again one more time the answer can be the same, you don’t know, but-*

I don’t know, but for what I’ve just said, you may-, it may be clear why I said what I said at the beginning that I could live without activism because it may, I may be coming to the point in my life where I’m actually thinking do I really want [pause]. Yeah certainly at this point in time I could live without activism. Er but maybe I’m also saying to myself I could live without this particular type of activism. Possibly I’m looking for something, you know I’ve done something very similar for so long.

*A long time.*

Yeah. That maybe im looking to sort of do something else which will still be activism of a sort, but I havn’t thought about htat too much. But I think its, to come back to your question, you know having said what I said it probably becomes a little bit clearer why you know I said fairly definitely at the begining yes I could live without it, I think I probably could. For a year or two [laughs]

*For a year or two [laughs]. Erm is there anything*

Have an extended holiday [laughs]

*Yeah, you deserve it.*

Thanks

*But maybe not to America*

Yeah, yeah defiantly not to America. No this is true, this is very true, yes

*Yeah, are you, is that, you’re never allowed to go to America?*

Well, they they’ve kept it deliberately unclear. I went back a year later, there was, there was a noise conference in America terribly respectable, you know, one of those so respectable they’re boring, terribly respectable conference, and I, I asked the noise conference organisers if I could pres- give a paper on aircraft noise, how you measure aircraft noise which is, I know it sounds tedious, but it’s actually quite a big issue because we believe that they, they, they underestimate the aircraft noise deliberately. And the organisers said yes, yes, yes that would be great, you know this is really a ticket to the conference, but someone from your background would be great co you know you’re talking about the real thing, so I went to the American embassy they kept me there, they kept me there for virtually a whole day, and I said this is the conference I’m going to, here’s the brochure, my name is on it as a key speaker, and they came back and said no sorry. So I said to the guy, are you saying therefore that I can never get into America and he said no I’m not saying that, but I said if I came back next year to go to an even more respectable conference is it worth my while. He said no not really. So they’re very careful not to be branded as saying no for ever, but probably in effect that’s what they are saying. So if you’ve ever been to New York tell me all about it [both laugh]

*I haven’t I’d love to though*

Yes so would I. [laughs]

*Have you never been?*

No I’ve never been. I’ve never been. I’m so close [laughs]

*Well you were there*

I was there, I was there

*That’s horrendous, that’s really crazy thing*

It was crazy, I mean it was just unreal. It was so unreal you know that the adrenalines going all the time you know there was this, you just think XXX. But er it was after I came back that I suddenly you know kind of it suddenly physically and emotionally hits you.

*Was it, was it scary at the time?*

Initially very, initially I was quite scared when they took me off the plane. Cos big burly New York cops took me of the plane

*Six of them?*

Six of them yeah, yeah. And they kept you standing there while all the other passengers, you know said have you been making threats against the president and I said no. And I thought that was a bit scary. And immediately I thought, I suddenly thought you have to wise up and you know maybe xxx at 4 o’clock in the morning, but you could perform here. Er after a while it because less scary because all these interviews by the secret service and the FBI and everyone else. But they were actually, they were strange because they were all very civil, actually even the burly cops were quite civil. But so therefore it wasn’t scary anymore, it was just, just annoying, and irritating and a bit confusing.

*Umm*

But er, no but because they were actually quite civil as individuals, it wasn’t really scary. A funny mix, that they represented barring from America, but doing it terribly politely. Weird

*Very weird*

It was. It was weird. That was it it was weird. Yeah. So, so if I stop activism as you say I won’t be going to holiday in America

*[laughs] Erm have you, is there, are there any burning issues that we haven’t covered that need to be addressed.*

It’s a good point. Er, no. I think we, I think we’ve covered it quite nicely.

*And just in terms of the, are there any kind of rounding up reflections on the impact of the M11 on your later career?*

Yep.

*Just to draw it back to the sort of focus of the interview*

Yeah, yeah, I, I think there is. I think [pause] I think the M11 was the first time I saw in a big way the, how, how residents and activists can work together, coming from different perspectives, and coming together to make an impact, and that clearly impacted on what I did, you know, later. Particularly in the Heathrow campaign. Er I think er, I learnt, as an activist I didn’t come from a Donga type perspective, er an and I learnt a lot from, from people who ere who were activists in that sense, erm and I understand how they thought how they work, er strengths and weaknesses, er, an and so I learnt that, that was the second thing it was, it, it was a period where I personally took more direct action than any other time, so although I haven’t done it so much in the Heathrow campaign, largely because of I’m rep-, representing the residents and there there would be difficulties, but bit it needs, I’m comfortable with direct action.

*But you’ve never been arrested is that right?*

No. Well I’ve never been arrested. Well no, not arrested or charged, I’ve been sort, it was very different in the, in the, it was before all this new legislation came in erm, the M11 stuff most of it, the tougher legislation came in as a result of the M11, but it was, what they would sort of do unless you were really persistent, any you would go in front of a bulldozer several times a day, they’d just haul you out. Er and then you got to know the security guard cos they’d been the same security guards same bulldozers, and unless you really did you know do it too often, too much erm you didn’t get arrested. Whereas now if you, you know, if you if you sat in front of a bulldozer your surely going to get arrested and charged

*Um*

And it was just a very different when, if if you broke injunctions there, there you know, a legal process was in place, like the Twyford Down people they broke injunctions, and, and because they wouldn’t give a guarantee they wouldn’t break it again they went to jail. Erm, but you had to do something pretty, erer a lot of people in Plane stupid they’ve been charged, how do you do all this, they’re getting arrested and charged left right and centre, how do you do this, it is justified the law is there, the authorities were learning as well. That was the other thing, now we ewre learning and they were learning

*Um*

And there was just that almost window of opportunity where you could do things, hell of a lot, and erm, nothing really very much happened to you really

*Umm*

And you, and you got, you’ve got bruises, you’ve got scrapes, and erm somebody’d broken their wrist at one stage, that sort of thing

*By scuffling with the police*

Yeah by scuffling, yes by scuffling, they would have all the, have all the techniques of, you know, they’d drag you away cos you were always getting dragged away. Er er, er and the press was behind your ears of course you sued, god forbid. Erm and erm yes, so there was a lot, I think scuffling’s the right word, a lot of scuffles, jostling, erm but, you know, you had to do, you had to do quite a lot to get arrested.

*Um*

And there were a lot of us. You know. They were reluctant to arrest you know in such large numbers. So yes for some reason or another I escaped [laughs]. Yes.

*Well I’m glad you did [both laugh] congratulations*

Well there you go, there you go. Yes absolutely.

*Would have stopped you being very effective*

Yeah. It is, it is different. So, so yes there were clear lessons which I learnt at m11 erm. I suppose although, although I had developed media skills before that I did think it probably developed them further, and, and, critically I was saying earlier it enabled me to kind of spot a little bit how to, how to get the press to work to our narrative. So it wasn’t individual media moments, because I think I could already do those, the M11 was the challenge was they could give a very different narrative, how do we turn it around. That, that has helped no end, in, in future campaigning. So there we go

*Excellent*

I’m afraid that was terribly long

*It was it was just exactly the right amount of time wasn’t it*

It was alright, it was alright, good, good

*Perfect, shall I turn it off, are we ready to*

I think we’re ready to stop. I think we’re gonna get thrown out quite soon well

*Ok, thank you so much*

**Name of interviewee: John Stewart**

**Project: Voices of Leytonstonia**

**Date of interview: 11/12/2015**

**Language: English**

**Venue: The British Library**

**Name of interviewer: Polly Rodgers**

**Length of interview: 134.04 minutes**

**Transcribed by: Holly Gilson**

**Archive Ref: 2015\_esch\_VoLe\_12**