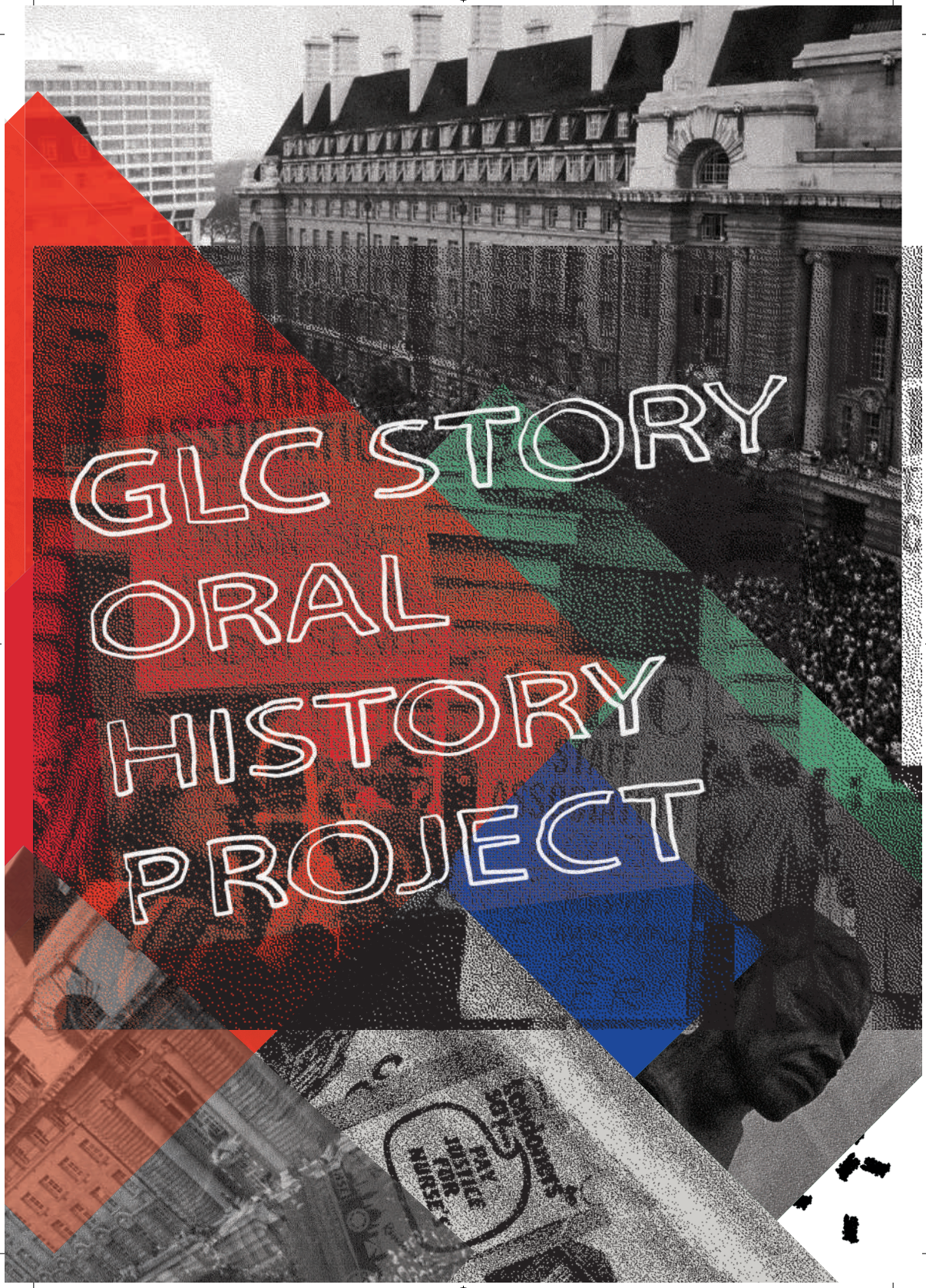

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“It was really exhilarating to hear from an elder of the movement about how they organised back in the day.”

1889
London County Council (LCC) created

1965
The LCC is replaced by the Greater London Council (GLC) which includes the outer London boroughs

1981
A radical socialist wing of the Labour Party win control of the GLC and Ken Livingstone becomes leader

1983
Conservatives win the national election with the abolition of the GLC in their manifesto

1983—1985
GLC Themed Years:
Peace Year ‘83, Anti Racism Year ‘84, Jobs Year ‘85

1986
Abolition of the GLC and northern Metropolitan County Councils

1997
Labour win 1997 election with promise to bring back London governance

2000
Greater London Authority and London Mayor created

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The GLC Story:

Capturing our radical past through oral histories

Deborah Grayson, Natasha Nkonde and Ken Livingstone

The Greater London Council (GLC) was the government for London before the current Assembly and Mayor. Between 1981 and 1986 the GLC was controlled by the radical left-wing of the Labour Party, existing as a hub for radical politics in London. Led by Ken Livingstone, the institution challenged attitudes of the day with its anti-racist, feminist and pro-lesbian and gay brand of socialism. It also challenged the entrenched and elitist political processes that had long been taken for granted.

The GLC Story was founded in September 2015 by Deborah Grayson and Natasha Nkonde to retell this piece of political history. Debs had come across the GLC through being involved with Soundings Journal, whose founders Stuart Hall, Doreen Massey and Mike Rustin were all involved in socialist politics in the 1980s. Natasha was organising with Take Back the City – a campaign to build a people's manifesto for the 2016 mayoral election – and the 'Remember Olive Collective', an oral history project archiving the life of the community leader and activist Olive Morris. She was struck by how little knowledge there was about the radical socialist history of London, and by the need for intergenerational dialogue in political spaces.

The GLC Story was awarded funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund to collect oral histories from people who were involved in the GLC, and in the social movements around it. This project has involved younger activists and organisers interviewing people who were part of the GLC and the projects and initiatives it funded. These interviews are available on our website www.glcstory.co.uk and this zine is part of sharing what we've learned with a wider audience.

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Learning from the past:

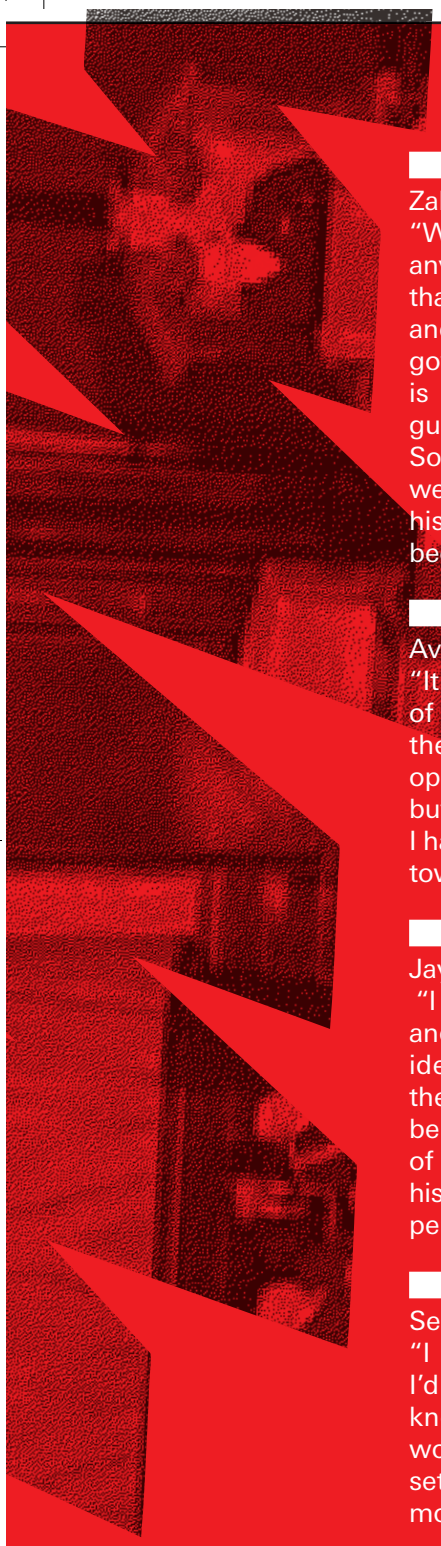
Reflections from our volunteers

Some of our volunteers shared their experiences of taking oral histories as part of the project.

Joshua Virasami
"Conducting my interview taught me that there is an immense truth in how internal political struggles, particularly between white and black anti-racist organisers, repeat themselves, and importantly how doing interviews like these can help us not repeat mistakes of the past so that we may finally reach the future we deserve!"

Zahra Dalilah
"Interviewing Farrukh Dhondy and Ansel Wong I learned that even the most legendary of campaigns and movements were as flawed and poorly resourced as our own. I learned of the dangers of institutionalising revolutionary thought as well as the limitations of working against the structures. If nothing else I was left wondering what our movements might look like in the context of a less hostile national and regional government.

I learnt a shit tonne. Being able to navigate London with the knowledge of how the buildings I'm entering were founded and under what political conversation the statues I'm walking past were commissioned has really impacted how i understand my role and how I engage with the spaces I want to occupy."



Zak Suffee

"When we were doing political organising there wasn't any framework, we had heard of different groups from that time but we didn't know there was this institution and how they fitted together. The fact that there was government funding to monitor the police back then is incredible, you don't hear about that stuff now. I guess it made me feel it's not a crazy thing to ask for. Sometimes when you're on the fringe you think 'are we just a bunch of weirdos?' But when you see the history it gives you renewed energy to demand things because you know they've happened before"

Aviah Day

"It was also really exhilarating to hear from an elder of the movement about how they organised back in the day, and compare that with how Sisters Uncut operates. Some of the problems were really similar but it was also interesting to hear reflections on things I hadn't thought of before, one example being the shift towards 'identity politics'."

Jay Bernard

"I like listening to the way people spoke in the eighties, and it will be interesting to hear how our voices and ideas change over time, when we listen back to these recordings in thirty or forty years. Society will be very different; it is important to have some record of how we understood the eighties in this particular historical moment. It will be interesting to see how that perspective changes as society changes."

Sekai Makoni

"I learnt about aspects of my grandmother's life that I'd had a vague sense of growing up but not in-depth knowledge of. I got to see how revolutionary the women's training and education centre she helped set up was and how important it is to learn from the models and approaches used in the past."

Who we interviewed

Linda Bellos worked as an officer for the GLC's Women's Committee in the early 80s. She was a prominent part of Labour's black sections and in 1986 she became leader of Lambeth council – the second black woman to lead a local authority.

Tony Bunyan is a writer and investigative journalist. He was deputy and then acting head of the GLC's Police Monitoring and Research Unit in the 1980s.

Farrukh Dhondy is an Indian-born British writer and playwright and one of the founders of the Black Theatre Coop, who was active in debates about 'ethnic minority arts' in the 1980s.

Bernardine Evaristo MBE FRSL FRSA is an author and Professor of Creative Writing. She was also one of the founders of Theatre of Black Women, which received GLC funding for a number of its performances.

Nadine Finch worked in the Programme Office at the GLC liaising on policy with the Policing, Race and Women's Committees.

Neil Fletcher was leader for three years of the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) a 'Special Committee of the GLC' that pushed forward significant educational policies.

Brenda Kirsch is a researcher and journalist, who worked for the GLC-funded magazine City Limits and then for the Police Committee and Support Unit where she edited the unit's publication, Policing London.

Loraine Leeson is an artist and academic; in the 1980s, she cofounded the Docklands Community Poster Project which was funded by the GLC. She is a member of the GLC Story Management Committee.

Paul Marris was Film and Video Officer for the GLC within the Arts and

Vwede Okerefe and Neil Fletcher

Recreation Department between 1983-1986. He now lives in Cambridge and works as a university lecturer in Media Arts.

Femi Otitoju was a GLC Outreach Worker for the Women's Committee Support Unit, and was also involved with the GLC-funded Lesbian and Gay switchboard and Black Lesbian and Gay Centre.

Di Parkin joined the GLC in 1981, expressing her political beliefs through her work as an equality practitioner with the Women's Committee Support Unit and Programme Office.

Ndaizivei Paul is a retired Electronics Engineer, originally from Zlmbabwe. She helped found the Haringey Women's Training and Education Centre which received seed funding from the GLC.

Devon Thomas was chair of the Brixton Defence Committee after the 1981 uprisings in Brixton, which received funding from the GLC police committee.

Hilary Wainwright is a sociologist and activist. In the 1980s she worked for the Greater London Enterprise Board, part of the GLC, and set up the Popular Planning Unit.

Ansel Wong is a former member of the Black Liberation Front, originally from Trinidad and Tobago. He was a Race Relations Adviser to the GLC in the Ethnic Minorities Unit from 1981-86.

Retelling a forgotten history

"It made town halls and local government relevant and joyous."

Di Parkin, employee of the Women's Committee Support Unit

"Oh, well, the GLC had existed back, you know, for a hundred years, and London County Council before it. Who were we upstarts, you know, "long-haired lesbians", "men in beards", who were we to come and tell them what they ought to be doing?"

The GLC of the 1980s profoundly shaped the London that we know today - yet for many of us who have arrived in the city more recently, this history is unknown. This is partly because Thatcher abolished the institution in 1986, and also because New Labour was hostile to its legacy, as a left-wing version of how the Labour party could be modernised. It is also hard for younger people to envisage a time when local government was an exciting place to be - even if the experimental ways they tried to make change didn't always succeed.

Femi Otitoju, officer in the Women's Support Unit:

"I'd already thought of the GLC as being a good thing. It seemed to be speaking to all the ways that I was, all the things that were a part of me."

Linda Bellos, officer for the Women's Committee:

"I came into County Hall and it was packed with ordinary people. Ordinary working-class people, black and white, y'know. What the Ken Livingstone administration did was to make town halls and local government services relevant and transparent and joyous even."

The GLC Story hopes to bring this history to life for Londoners who often don't know their city's past, and to ask some important questions of our own political moment. The imaginative approach to politics in the 1980s GLC was part of its success, but also caused its demise. As Hilary Wainwright - one of the people we interviewed - notes, "there were few precedents, and no rules, for a more open working relationship with Londoners", though similar political experiments were happening at that time in cities such as Sheffield and Liverpool. In the aftermath of the EU referendum, and in the middle of Brexit negotiations that have divided political opinion, what can we learn from this unprecedented period? What was the social and political legacy of the GLC? And how is it relevant to politics today?

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Who makes decisions?

"The people planning? That's not really acceptable."

The GLC was a layer of government between national government and the borough councils. In the 80s there were many conversations about poverty, class and inequality in London, just as there is today. One of the unusual things the GLC tried to do was include Londoners in decision-making – so there were lots of tensions around who should get a say in every area from employment to education to transport.

An example of this was Fare's Fair. When the Labour Party were elected in 1981, they promised to cut transport fares by 25%. The London Borough of Bromley took them to court saying they didn't have the right to make this decision for the whole of London. There was a big campaign to keep fares low, which was eventually successful.

Peter Dawe, Labour GLC councillor for Waltham Forest

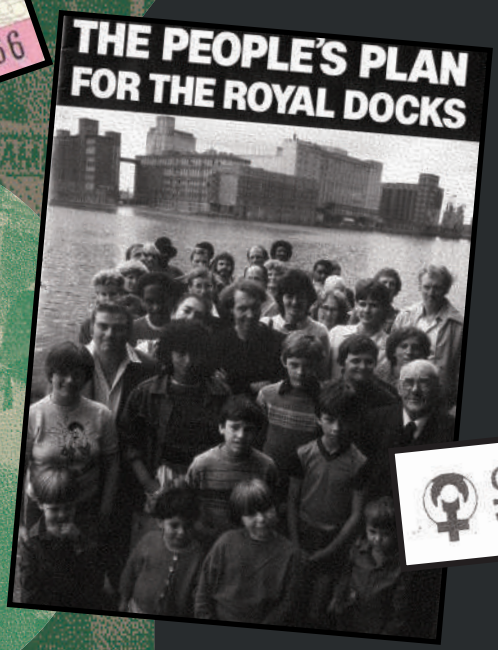
"Fares in London were very expensive compared with other capital cities… we were shocked when Bromley took us to court on this issue, we believed we'd acted legally, and it was genuinely popular. We had to put up the fares – but a year later, after getting legal advice, we were able to reduce the fares."

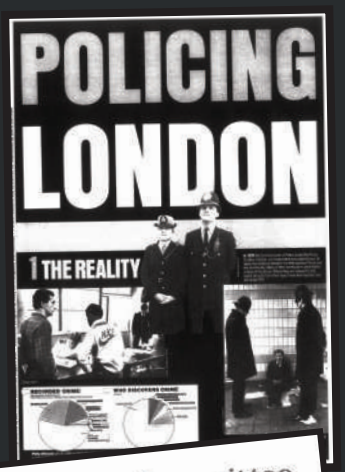
Hilary Wainwright, employee in the Popular Planning Unit

"There was quite a lot of hostility towards it from the politicians, well mainly from the civil servants who kinda thought 'the people planning? That's not really acceptable'."

The People's Plan for the Royal Docks was a direct attempt to address the needs of local residents in the regeneration of the Docklands area, rather than leave it in the hands of developers who wanted to create what is now City airport. Community initiatives such as the Docklands Poster Project helped spread the word. However the London Docklands Development Corporation were answerable only to the central government, not residents or local government, and the airport went ahead in spite of community protests.

There were also tensions around decision making within the GLC. New committees were created to tackle issues such as racism, policing and gender inequality. In theory, these were more democratic, however the committees often became rigid and hierarchical themselves. New tensions developed between elected politicians, the committee members and those who considered themselves part of the grassroots movement. Moreover, the GLC had internal issues with sexism, racism and classism, even as it tried to tackle them.





Femi Otitoju, officer in the Women's Support Unit:

"Well, one of the most disappointing things about working in the Women's Support Unit was the lack of collaboration between us and the Race and Ethnic Minorities Unit. I think actually sometimes we were pitted against one another. And it was male-dominated, and I think they found it difficult to deal with women a bit."

Linda Bellos, officer for the Women's Committee

"I enjoyed the work. I had terrible bosses. Appalling racism – I'm not gonna name them but their memory lingers on. They were appalling towards me. They were supposed to be leading on race and they were homophobic as well. Apart from that I think they were ok. (Laughs)"

Spaces and Places

The GLC was a major landowner, and used public spaces and buildings to support its political vision. These are some of the places which came up in our interviews.

Nelson Mandela statue, Southbank
The statue of Mandela next to Southbank centre was erected in 1985, when he was in prison and Thatcher's government considered him a terrorist.

Yaa Asantewaa
Bernadine Evaristo, co-founder of Theatre of Black Women:

"There was a venue called Yaa Asantewaa. And it was actually a black arts centre. And they always booked our shows. It was fantastic."

London Lesbian and Gay Centre, Farringdon, bought by the GLC
Femi Otitoju, officer in the Women's Support Unit:

"We had disco in the evening, and a woman's day, exercise classes. There were hassles about everything. 'Oh, S&M dykes were coming in, that's awful, oh, they're doing poppers, everybody's racist....' Nonetheless, it was an amazing resource."

Black Lesbian and Gay Centre, Peckham, supported by the GLC
Femi Otitoju, officer in the Women's Support Unit:

We finally got premises in Peckham, under the arches. We ran counseling, and socials. It was quite a challenging space, but it was our space and it was very precious."

London Women's Centre, Kingsway, bought by the GLC
Di Parkin, employee of the Women's Committee Support Unit:

"There were three organisations that did have offices inside the Kingsway Hall, the London Women's Centre, One was the National Abortion Campaign, one was called Women and Computers, and another called Mycrosister who were working to promote women's issues in computing."

Armada going down the Thames
Loraine Leeson, co-founder of the Docklands Community Poster Project:

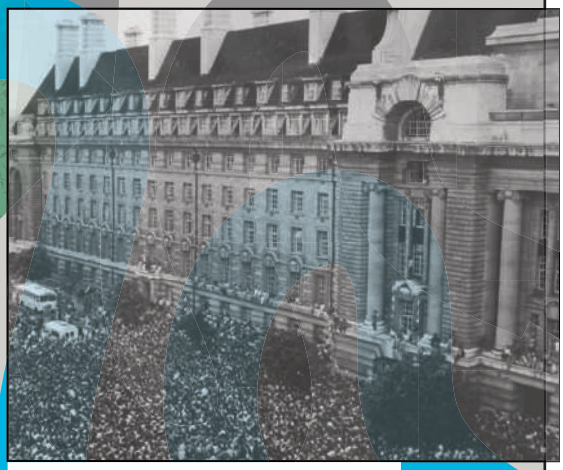
"Somebody from the Docklands campaign said 'It's time to take another petition to Parliament' and somebody else said 'Since they're on the river and we're on the river, why don't we take it by boat?' In the end a thousand people took to the river with banners, balloons and music, and that was the first People's Armada to Parliament… it was an experience that brought tears to the eyes"

Walthamstow Marshes
Peter Dawe, Labour GLC councillor for Waltham Forest

"We saved Walthamstow marshes from gravel extraction. It's really good now to see it as a fantastic nature reserve."

Royal Festival Hall, Southbank
Brenda Kirsch, publications officer for the GLC Police Committee

"Did you know that, until Ken Livingstone came along, the Royal Festival Hall was locked up all day? And he unlocked it, and you could just walk in there."

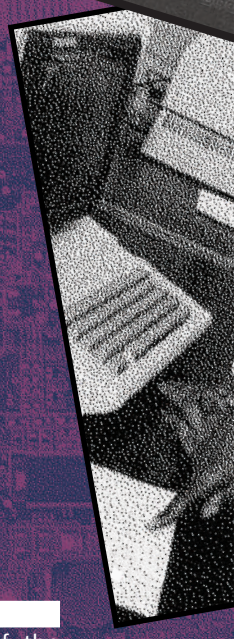


County Hall, home of the GLC
Di Parkin, employee of the Women's Committee Support Unit:

"During the miners' strike County Hall became the People's Palace, the miners were practically living in the GLC, sleeping in bits of the building, Women Against Pit Closures had a caravan outside"

Innovation and Culture

"You've not just come here to learn electronics..."



If you've ever ridden an electric bike, eaten fair trade bananas or Divine Chocolate, or appreciated the accessibility ramps on buses, then you've experienced a direct result of the 1980s GLC, who supported all these ideas through the Greater London Enterprise Board. By promoting innovations they pushed the boundaries of what local government could and should do to positively impact its residents.

Going Digital

The GLC also embraced digital technology. It worked out new ways of organising so that new innovations in computing directly benefitted those who were most at risk of being marginalised or made redundant. This was the motivation behind the Haringey Women's Technical and Educational College, for example.

Equal Opportunities

All of this worked in tandem with structural and social innovations. Ideas such as equal opportunities, for instance, were new codes of behaviour that could underpin concepts such as race or sex

Ndaizivei Paul, cofounder of the Haringey Women's Training and Education Centre

"The students needed to understand that you've not just come here to learn electronics... but the environment is much wider than just electronics. They still need to participate within their own community."

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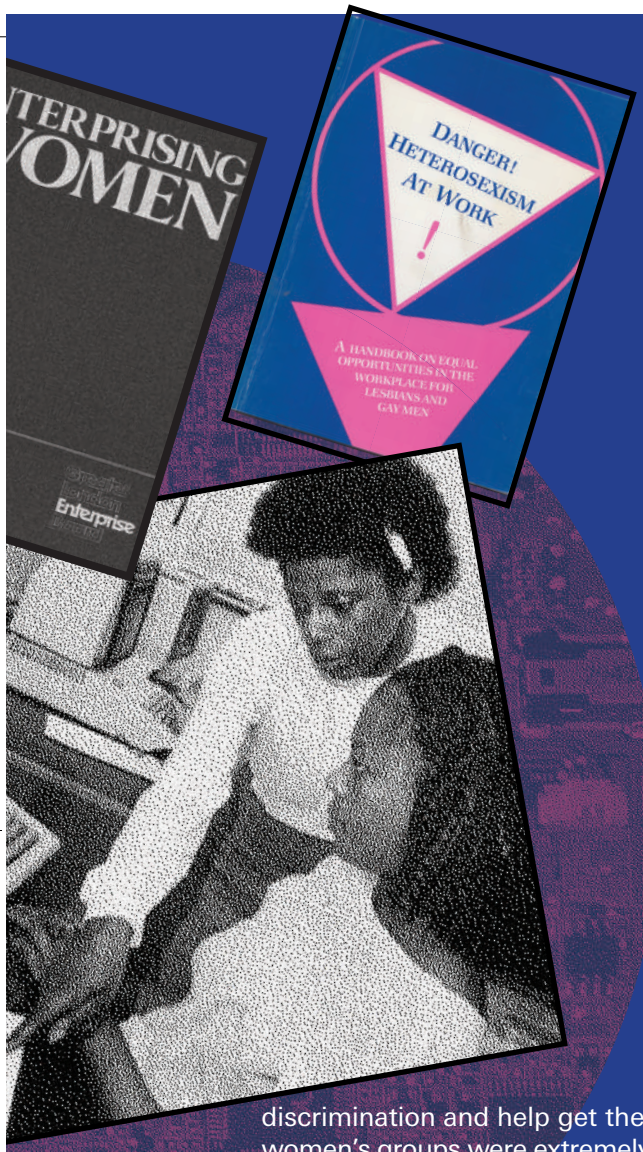

Bernadine Evaristo, co-founder of Theatre of Black Women:

"The GLC funded us for perhaps a couple of years. It was a really fertile environment for people in the arts who were not represented in the so-called mainstream - theatre, publishing, I mean there was Sheba publishing which was really very black publishers, other black women's theatre companies came through."

Linda Bellos, officer for the Women's Committee:

"I mean you have to remember how hostile the Tories were both the press and Margaret Thatcher of having crèches and childcare. Now, the current tory government is talking about childcare because they take it as a given. When we first were doing this, they were hostile. I mean lots of things that the GLC did were ridiculed in the media and are now the norm."

discrimination and help get them written into law. Feminists and women's groups were extremely innovative in trying to ensure that their needs were enshrined in the practices of the institution. They advocated childcare, for example, which was heavily opposed by the Tories, but has since become an acceptable idea.

Black Arts Movement

At the same time, a radical political art movement was founded This was spearheaded by artists, curators and thinkers such as Stuart Hall, David A. Bailey, Sonia Boyce, Lubaina Himid, Black Audio Film Collective and Maud Sulter. Many received GLC funding and directly challenged the dominant narrative by re-imagining and re-presenting blackness.

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The GLC and its critics

"The GLC is modern socialism..."

Norman Tebbitt, Conservative MP speaking to London Tories in 1984

"The Greater London Council is typical of this new modern, divisive socialism. It must be defeated. So we shall abolish the Greater London Council."

Di Parkin, employee of the Women's Committee Support Unit

"There would be people who were "bloody Lefties", you know, "giving money to lesbian crèches, we don't want any of that"..."

The GLC polarised people. The experimental politics of local government, in addition to Ken Livingstone's "high spend" socialist approach, was dubbed the "loony left" and put the GLC in direct conflict with Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government.

But it's important to note that criticism came from the left as well as the right. Many people criticised the GLC for undermining, and in some cases destroying, the grassroots resistance that had existed before. See Red, the women's poster collective, described the impact of GLC funding as "a break from the older, collective pattern of work." It was accused of pushing a radical socialist agenda, monetising the movement and encouraging dependence on the state.

Brenda Kirsch, publications officer for the GLC Police Committee

"Although it was very positive that local community groups were given grants to operate, it became clear to me during this process that groups were then becoming dependent on grants. People lost the habit of how you organise."

Ansel Wong, Race Relations Adviser to the GLC

"Some of those who were in receipt of funding obviously had a very positive attitude towards us. There were others who felt their politics was such that they felt we were just window-dressing as black people in there … but it sometimes hurt when you were told in public that you're a traitor to the black race and you shouldn't be doing certain things."

In 1997, long after the abolition of the GLC, Tony Blair explicitly stated that there was "no chance" of the party being suddenly taken over by Jeremy Corbyn. Yet post-EU referendum and in the face of worrying Brexit negotiations, it is telling that an old stalwart of the so-called "loony Left" has won broad support, with the help of many others who were involved with the GLC. It is also telling that many of the same newspapers that attacked them in the 1980s are attacking them now, largely for upholding the same principles.

Abolition

"...It must be defeated."

Brenda Kirsch, publications officer for the GLC Police Committee

"The abolition of the GLC was very symbolic, but it was also the beginning of the attack on local authority power."

Linda Bellos, officer for the Women's Committee

"I was party to the discussions about what was going to happen for Lambeth and for other councils once the GLC was abolished. So, we were meeting to plan how we could keep the radical bits and get as much money out of the building as possible."

In 1983 the Conservative Party vowed to abolish the GLC, as well as six Metropolitan County Councils in the north and midlands, saying they were expensive and unnecessary - borough councils were enough. In fact, Thatcher wanted to undermine the power base the left was building in the GLC, as well as in cities like Liverpool and Sheffield. All these institutions disappeared in March 1986.

The destruction of the GLC left a hole in London's governance, and there was no organisation able to make London-wide decisions until the Assembly and Mayor were created in 2000. Ken Livingstone returned to power as London's first Mayor, successfully running as an independent after New Labour refused to endorse him as their candidate. His opening speech began, "As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted fourteen years ago..."

Despite Livingstone's triumph and the return of London governance, in many ways the damage was irreversible. The destruction of the GLC, the smashing of the miners, the crushing of the unions, the dismantling of the welfare state and the introduction of Local Government Acts hollowed out the economic

Di Parkin, employee of the Women's Committee Support Unit

"It was incredibly difficult because there's this clock ticking and we were trying to see that we could get as much of the GLC resources as we could out to community groups or to other London boroughs before the midnight hour. It was really like Brexit, you know."

Brenda Kirsch, publications officer for the GLC Police Committee

"I really hate the fact that that building has become part commercial, part trashy building. I just find that area outside the GLC so tacky, I think it's a disgrace. This tacky area with Mcdonald's and rubbish. I feel so sad about that. And people walking by just don't know what the history of that building is."

structures of the left, which were the routes by which wealth – and socialist ideas – might be redistributed. Now, the relationship between residents and local government is largely extractive: austerity measures mean councils must fund themselves by making cuts to services, selling off property, appeasing private developers and imposing fines. This is in stark contrast to the era between 1981 and 1986, when the GLC actively opposed making cuts and tried to redistribute the growing wealth of the city – a period known as the "big bang" – back to the public purse.
The fundamental struggle of the GLC during this period was how to shift power relations between government and the people. Ultimately, these tensions were never resolved. Perhaps abolition by Thatcher, who was deeply unpopular at the time even within her own party, saved the GLC from facing the consequences of its own decisions and mistakes.

County Hall, where all of this took place, is now home to London Aquarium and McDonald's. Other buildings now house London Dungeon and a hotel. Most of the tourists who go by this area are unaware of its history and few Londoners recognise the ghostly presence of the capital's radical past.

Volunteers

Devon Thomas and Zena Edwards

Jay Bernard is a writer, film programmer and archivist from London.

Zahra Dalilah is a Black feminist writer and activist from South London currently researching and campaigning on gentrification and inequality in London and fairer media representation for women and people of colour, especially black women.

Aviah Sarah Day is a member of the feminist direct action group Sisters Uncut, taking direct action against cuts to domestic violence services. She is also a PhD student at The University of Essex.

Tanya Denhere is a writer from London who believes in the power of art to foster radical change in the public and private sphere.

Zena Edwards has been involved in writing for performance for 20 years, exploring themes such as environmental justice, intergenerational dialogue and race and diversity.

Sekai Makoni is Ndaizivei Paul's grandaughter. She is a Black feminist researcher and podcaster who enjoys eating sadza and talking to her Gogo about her past!

Lucy McFadzean works with archive film and video in London. She has a particular interest in community video projects from the period, and has been putting on screenings of GLC funded films alongside the project.

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Vwede Okorefe is a queer Black British woman of Nigerian descent, who works with the renewable energy charity 1010 and is currently investing in becoming a more informed and involved citizen.

Claire Perrault works as a media archivist (currently at the Tate) with an interest in exploring, facilitating and activating historical narratives that hold the potential to empower and reeducate. She specialises in the digitisation and preservation of film-based content.

Zak Suffee is a researcher focusing on race and migration.

Ayeisha Thomas-Smith is Training Organiser at the New Economy Organisers Network. She is an advisor for Take Back the City and Red Pepper, and has an MA in Postcolonial Culture and Global Policy.

Joshua Virasami is a Londoner of Mauritian origin, his time is spent thinking, writing, performing and organising toward revolutionary upheaval at local and international level. His work can be found on various online outlets and you can follow him @KingKreol on Twitter.

Josie Wales studied History at University and now works as an archivist. A volunteer at the Feminist Library in London, Josie is involved in various projects to collect and preserve stories of political and social movements.

And: Hero Austin, Melanie Bartlett, Lucy Warin, Evan Ifekoya, Didem Incegoz, Alex Ingram, Rotimi Skyers, Memuna Rashid , Angelica Udueni

GLC Story coordinators

Deborah Grayson is completing a PhD based on research with an interfaith charity, committed to transformative antiracism and transfeminism is both her academic and voluntary activities.

Natasha Nkonde is Regional Organiser at Edge Fund, and has organised with groups such as Sisters Uncut and Black Lives Matter UK. Natasha is a Zambian immigrant interested in oral histories as a form of direct action and a tool for intergenerational dialogue.

Acknowledgments

Linda Bellos and Aviah Sarah Day

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In memory:
Doreen Massey
Robin Murray
Alan Tomkins

heritage lottery fund
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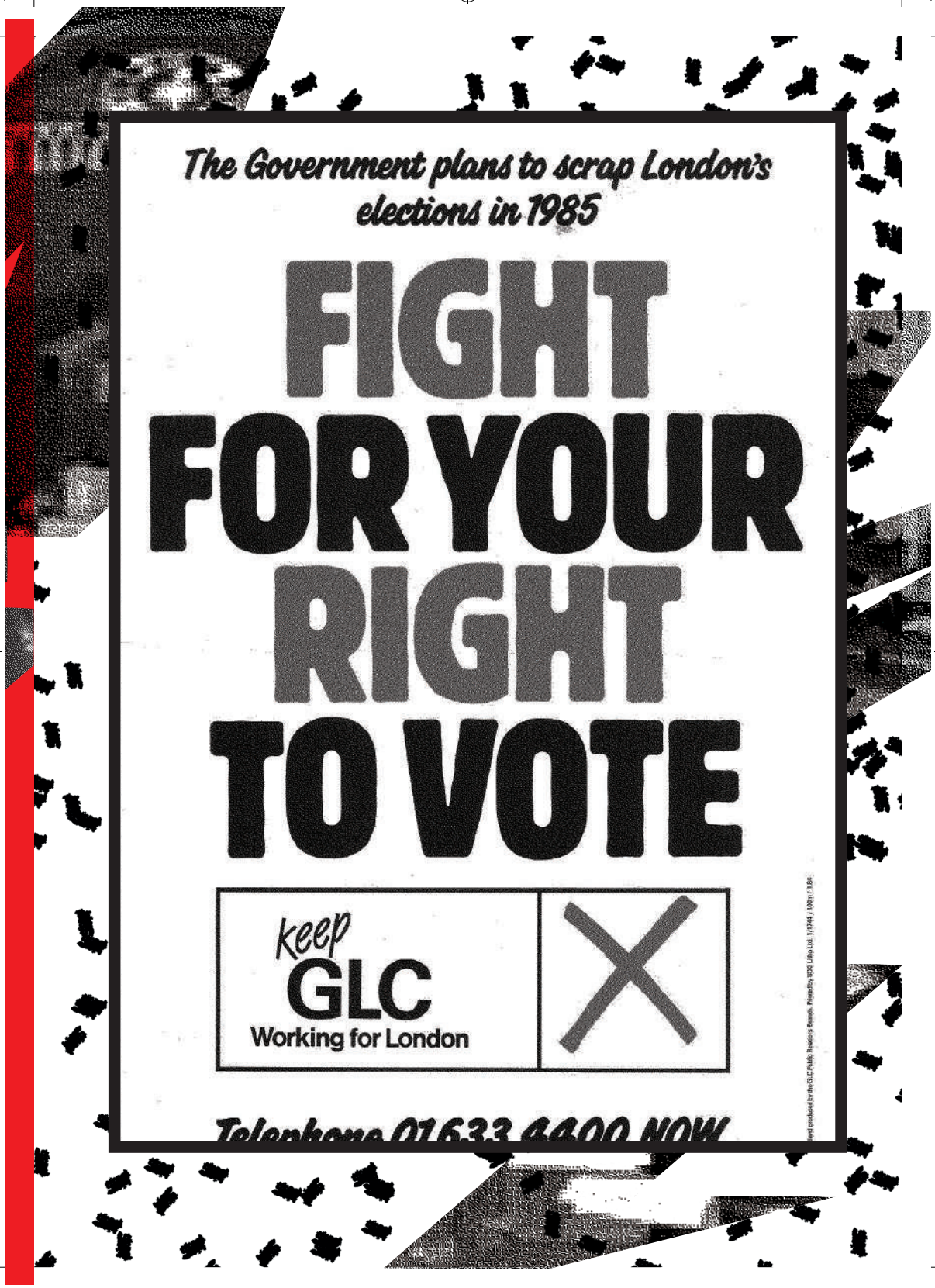
THE GLC STORY



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