Resistance to the Poll Tax

edited by
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ICBH Witness Seminar Programme

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Resistance to the Poll Tax

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Chaired by Adam Lent
Seminar edited by Virginia Preston
Introductory paper by Adam Lent

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Institute of Contemporary British History

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From the audience:

CHARLES HAWES

Citation Guidance

References to this and other witness seminars should take the following form:

> **Witness name, in 'Witness Seminar Title', held [date of seminar], (Institute of Contemporary British History, [date of publication], [full internet address of seminar]), page number of reference [use the number given in the header at the top of the page referenced].**

For example, Robert Wray's account of the demonstration at Trafalgar Square should be footnoted as follows:

> **Robert Wray, in 'Resistance to the Poll Tax', seminar held 1 April 2000, (Institute of Contemporary British History, 2003, http://www.icbh.ac.uk/icbh/witness/polltax/), pp.51-2.**

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Resistance to the Poll Tax: Briefing Paper

Adam Lent

The aim of a witness seminar is to allow participants in a historical event to give their account of that event and to discuss the issues arising. It is an important way of maintaining a record and clarifying the details of major turning-points in British history. Although the panel members will kick-off discussion many people in the audience will have their own recollections and they are encouraged to contribute.

The poll tax was an issue that not only led to the downfall of Margaret Thatcher and, quite possibly, marked the beginning of the very long demise of the Conservative Government, it also promoted the largest and most effective political mobilisation in post-war British history. There are no restrictions on where discussion may roam in the seminars but below are a series of questions to which we will hopefully have slightly clearer answers by the end of the day.

Why was the mobilisation against the poll tax so widespread? In an era of movements, the anti-poll tax campaign stands out as the most rapid mobilisation of the largest number of people. Was this success the result of the strikingly iniquitous nature of the tax itself, a wider dissatisfaction with a decade of Thatcherism, or the choice of the right organisation and right tactics by the movement's organisers?

Why, despite its divisions, was the movement against the poll tax so effective? Many major movements have suffered as a result of internal divisions and clashes over ideology, strategy and many other issues. The anti-poll tax movement had its own share of arguments and splits but this did not seem to dent its ability to mobilise or defeat the poll tax. Why?

What was the legacy of the anti-poll tax movement? At the height of the campaign many activists hoped and believed that the mobilisation against the poll tax would lead to a wider mobilisation against other social and political inequalities. To what extent did the campaigns against the Criminal Justice Bill and road-building in the early to mid-1990s develop out of networks created by the anti-poll tax movement? Did the movement's failure to stimulate much wider continuing mobilisation mean that it was nothing more than a particularly impressive ad-hoc, single issue campaign?

What caused the events in Trafalgar Square? The events of 31 March 1990 in central London were one of the most serious outbreaks of civil disorder in post-war Britain. At the time, the police, mainstream politicians and even some leaders of the anti-poll tax movement blamed the conflict on a small band of protestors bent on violence. Since then evidence has emerged which shows the police may have launched the first attack. What is the true sequence of events?

How important were the Trafalgar Square events in defeating the poll tax? The conflict in Trafalgar Square certainly gained maximum publicity for the issue of the poll tax around the world and, at the time, it seemed like the event which summed-up all the frustrations of the past two years. But did it concede too much in terms of propaganda to the mainstream politicians? Or was it the event that started the process which led to the abolition of the tax and the resignation of Thatcher? Would a peaceful demonstration have had the same effect?

Chronology

1987	April	First Anti-Poll Tax Union (APTU) formed in Maryhill, Glasgow.
	May	The Community Charge Bill for Scotland receives royal assent.
	June	Conservative Government re-elected
	Nov	Community Resistance Against the Poll Tax Conference brings APTUs together in Glasgow. Agrees to emphasise non-registration and non-payment campaign while giving a lesser role to non-implementation and non-collection. Organisation based on neighbourhood groups agreed.
	Dec	Militant found Labour Movements Against the Poll Tax.
1988	Jan	Labour leader, Neil Kinnock, condemns non-payment campaign and launches a petition against the poll tax instead.
	May	Scottish National Party Executive back non-payment campaign.
		Scottish Trades Union Congress launches anti-poll tax campaign with support for non-payment "if there is a mandate from the public".
	Sept	Special Labour Party Conference in Govan backs National Executive Committee position against non-payment with support of union block vote.
		Dissident Scottish MPs set-up Committee of One Hundred, of prominent Scots who are refusing to pay the poll tax.
	Nov	SNP Candidate, Jim Sillars, wins Govan by-election campaigning on issue of non-payment; a 19,509 Labour majority becomes a 2,500 SNP majority.
1989	1 April	Poll tax comes into force in Scotland; 30,000 march against the tax in Edinburgh.
	Sept	Two-hundred delegates from APTUs meet in London to discuss setting-up All-Britain Federation of APTUs. 3D Network (Don't Pay, Don't Collect, Don't Implement) is set-up by those opposed to Militant domination of the Conference and Federation.
	Nov	Over one-thousand APTUs in Britain.

1990	March	Following a series of large and sometimes violent protests outside Town Halls across the country, an anti-poll tax march in London attracts over 200,000 people Violent conflict between police and protestors breaks out in Trafalgar Square. 50,000 attend march in Glasgow.
	April	Number of APTUs trebles.
		Poll tax introduced in England and Wales. Official figures show that nearly one million have not paid in Scotland out of an eligible 3.7 million.
		Tommy Sheridan and Steve Nally, Militant members of the All-Britain Federation of APTUs condemn the violence in Trafalgar Square.
		3D Network sets-up Trafalgar Square Defendants Campaign.
	Sept	All-Britain Federation of APTUs organises People's March Against the Poll Tax from Glasgow to London.
	Oct	Trafalgar Square Defendants Campaign organise march in Brixton which ends in conflict with police.
		Cyril Munden is arrested and becomes first person to face jail for non-payment. The *News of the World* pays his poll tax for him and he avoids jail.
	Nov	Margaret Thatcher resigns as Prime Minister. John Major replaces her and brings Michael Heseltine into the Cabinet to oversee reform of the poll tax.
	Dec	Brian Wright is jailed for 21 days – first imprisonment for non-payment of poll tax.
1991	Jan	Trafalgar Square Defendants Campaign establishes a prisoner support group.
	March	The Chancellor of the Exchequer announces £140 reduction in all poll tax bills to be paid for by 2.5% rise in VAT.
		Liberal Democrats win Ribble Valley by-election by 4,000 votes overturning a 19,528 Conservative majority – the poll tax is the key issue.
		Michael Heseltine announces abolition of poll tax.
	April	Trafalgar Square Defendants Campaign prisoner support group is supporting 27 long term prisoners.

Much of this chronology is taken from:

Danny Burns, *Poll Tax Rebellion*, (London & Stirling: AK Press, 1992).

Resistance to the Poll Tax

edited by Virginia Preston

This seminar took place on Saturday 1 April 2000 in the British Local History Room, Institute of Historical Research, Senate House, London. It was organised jointly by the Institute of Contemporary British History and the New Politics Research Group, and sponsored by the Department of Politics, Sheffield University, Sociology, Open University and the Department of Sociology and Anthropology, University of East London. The seminar was chaired by Adam Lent, who also wrote the briefing paper and chronology, and the participants were Danny Burns, Glen Burrows, Harriet Jones, Tim Jordan, Charles Loft, Dave Morris, Richard Murgatroyd, Gareth Prosser and Robert Wray.

Session 1: The Resistance Movement

ADAM LENT

31 March 1990. The demonstration involved about 200,000 people. See chronology.

In 1964 the Revolutionary Socialist League was set up to try and enter the Labour party and get its policies adopted there, and became known as the 'Militant tendency', also the name of its newspaper. In 1982 the Labour party decided that Militant members could not also be Labour party members and began to expel them. In 1997 Militant became the Socialist Party.

at Brunel University

Well I guess I am an academic and a witness, some of us are I suppose, having been vaguely involved and having been in Trafalgar Square ten years ago yesterday. I suppose – it's interesting actually this is a relatively small seminar – I think it shows in some ways how the poll tax and the campaign against the poll tax have in some ways drifted into the margins of collective memory. Which is quite strange considering that it was, I suppose the biggest, I think arguably the biggest political movement of the 20th century in Britain. It was ten years ago yesterday that the riot occurred in Trafalgar Square* and it hasn't really been marked in any way, apart from I understand, Militant or what's left of Militant had a party yesterday.* I remember they used to have rallies in the Albert Hall; now I think they just get together for drinks to commemorate events. So I think it's a shame but this hopefully will go down on record and I think maybe over time people will begin to look at the poll tax again., and look at the history of the whole campaign. And also as Government documents become available then more and more history will be written about it. I know Richard Murgatroyd is doing a PhD on the poll tax campaign at the moment* so the work is being done and this should be very important.

I think what we'll do is we'll keep it very informal, anyone who

wants to contribute can, but I'll initially take contributions from Glen Burrows, Danny Burns and Robert Wray. I'll just tell you what I know about them at the moment. Robert was involved in the anti-poll tax campaign, I'm not sure whereabouts was it you were?

ROBERT WRAY Well I was in Bermondsey, South London

LENT And was at Trafalgar Square, and was actually charged, I'm not sure, he'll tell you more detail about this, following the riot and ended up going on the run I think to escape the attention of the police. He'll tell you more about that. And was involved in the defendants' campaign that was after that.* Danny was very deeply involved in the non-payment campaign and has written the only book, full length book, on the poll tax campaign, the book *The Poll Tax Rebellion* available from A. K. Press.* And most of the details in this chronology were in fact taken from that book. And Glen was a Labour Councillor in, was it Avon?

The Trafalgar Square Defendants' Campaign (TSDC), set up to provide help for those arrested while demonstrating against the poll tax.

Poll Tax Rebellion, Danny Burns (AK Press/Attack International, 1992).

GLEN BURROWS No, no, Bridgwater, Sedgmoor, you won't have heard of it.

LENT And was one of the many Labour councillors who ended up in trouble with the leadership, the local leadership, as a result of her opposition to the poll tax. So I don't want to pre-empt any more of what they are going to tell you themselves about their experiences. The idea of the seminar is to get witness statements, for people to give accounts rather than detailed analyses of their experience but obviously you can move into that area as well. So I think we'll start with Danny if that's OK? And then I'll take Robert and then Glen.

DANNY BURNS Can I just check, when we were given details of this the thing was split into two, are we still doing this or looking at the campaign firstly and then the...

LENT I think probably that's a good idea. We'll start looking at the campaign and then let's move on to the other accounts thereof.

HARRIET JONES It also helps often if instead of talking for ten minutes do leap in because it's usually best if we have a sort of conversation.

BURNS I think I'd just like to throw a few things in, and it does link to the debate about the roles of the demonstration, and how significant that was. And my feeling is that the demonstration was significant, we'll come on to that later, but it was only significant because there

was such a huge base for it, and that huge base was built on, if you like, a very very micro level in a way which I'd not seen anywhere else before. And I think the most significant factor about it was that it wasn't built within political parties, or trade unions, or any other political structure, it was usually created by a group of friends, perhaps, or perhaps political associates of one sort or another coming together to say 'Look, there's a big issue here, there's a real problem, people are going to struggle, we're going to struggle, what are we going to do about it?'

And in Bristol it was quite phenomenal in a sense, because these little groupings popped up everywhere and in the south-west, to the point is that, at the height of the campaign, there was something like, I think it was about 55 Anti-Poll Tax Unions, 30 of them were just in the Bristol area. And my feeling was that the routes by which information travelled were really in the pubs, in the crèches, waiting for kids outside schools, all the places where people interacted socially and they weren't in a sort of classical political arena.

And I think that was critical in a number of senses, one is it was critical because nobody really knew it was happening. I mean people who were involved knew it was happening, but the people within the establishment didn't know it was happening at all. And actually what was extraordinary was that people even quite low down the political establishment, within political parties, within trade union branches, often didn't actually have a clue what was going on sort of at a subterranean level on the ground. I think that was really important because what it meant was that by the time they found out that something was happening it had already happened. And therefore they didn't really have the capacity to control it in the same way that they tended to control other sorts of political movements. So I think that was very important.

I think it was really important that it was action-focused, what happened. That the groups were really based around what people were doing, whether it was about leafleting or about some sorts of physical action in some cases against a poll tax office, or whether it was about talking to people, or whether it was about burning a bill or whatever it was. And I think that cut through the problem that a lot of ordinary people have about sitting in meetings and getting bored. And more often than not sitting in meetings feeling patronised, and feeling inadequate because the people who have been there for years are telling them what to do and shutting them out. If people were able to focus on what they were doing then they were much more likely to stay involved. Those groups that enabled people to take on tasks and keep involved through taking responsibility for something grew and grew because then they pass on something good to someone else. And that I think was the problem with those number of groups that were controlled by political parties and in particular I'm thinking about Militant, and the Militant issue was a real issue for us. And I think we got caught up in the early stages of the campaign in trying to counter what a lot of us saw as a very authoritarian way of dealing with what was actually a

much much bigger movement than any small party could hope to control.

And we started to counter, to deal with it in a sense in a confrontational way and spent a lot of our energies doing that, which was a complete waste of time. It was completely transformed when basically what we did was, we went down to, created if you like, tens of more Anti-Poll Tax Unions and got hundreds and thousands of more people involved, to the point that it was very difficult for those people who were trying to control, to control because there just simply weren't enough of them. Putting it crudely there were about 40 members of Militant in Bristol. By the time there was 35 Anti-Poll Tax Unions, some of which, like the one I was involved in at the time in Easton,* had over 500 members. It was actually very difficult to control in that sort of way.

Area of Bristol just to the east of the city centre.

But that isn't the case in all areas. I think there were clearly a lot of areas throughout the whole of the UK that were completely dominated by that sort of approach. And I think the fundamental problem with that was not that Militant was involved, or that they were organising and so on and so forth, I mean OK that's fine, we were trying to create a mass movement that everybody was involved in. I think the fundamental problem was that the way of organising kept control of what was happening in the hands of very few people and therefore other people didn't take responsibility because they assumed that the people in the political parties were taking responsibility, and it narrowed involvement down to a very small number of people. So actually what happened is you might get ten or 15 groups controlled in that way and they might actually only have really accounted for 30 or 40 people. Whereas another ten or 15 that were much more open in their political structures actually had hundreds and thousands of people involved. So I think that was quite important in terms of the way things were organised. Can I just say one last thing which I think was important which is this, that there was an ethos if you like that came through the Anti-Poll Tax Unions and I'm not sure how constructive that was but, which was very tolerant of different ways of engaging. So some people were involved in petitions, some people were involved in lobbying their MPs, and some people were involved in the demonstrations, and others in no-payments and others in court support work and others in fire-bombing offices and so on and so forth. I actually think that the totality of that was actually really important. That those people that were lobbying their MPs were part of a process which actually helped to legitimise the people that were fire-bombing the poll tax offices, and the other way round. So there was a sort of sense in which there was a parallel action, you basically let people get on with whatever they felt motivated to do. And the fact that they were motivated was important because if people are forced into doing things that they don't agree with they just drop out. So I think that is a fundamental lesson in a sense for group organisation because people automatically drift in the end towards the things that are working, and clearly it was non-payment

that was at the heart of that. So all sorts of other things happened but non-payment became sort of the front of the crew from which everything else sprung.* And that does happen almost automatically because you start to see what's working and what isn't. So I think that sort of flexibility within political organisation is quite fundamental when you're talking about a mass movement. I'll leave it there with just that thought.

A 1991 Audit Commission report found that an average of 18% of people in shire districts were not paying their poll tax, 27% in metropolitan districts, 23% in outer London and 34% in inner London boroughs. In Scotland, the figure of 18% non-payment in the first year of operation had risen to nearly 35% in the second year.

WRAY

Right, there's some interesting things that's been said there but I suppose my real analysis of it is probably tempered by the fact that my whole role in it, for want of a better word, was in the demonstrations in Trafalgar Square. So, basically I'm looking at it from the point past where Danny's started from, where you actually get to the point where all this groundswell of opinion and all the anger built up and then it explodes and then that's my background. So I don't really know what I can say other than it was a bit of a surreal experience being involved in a riot, when you have a very large percentage of the population who might not necessarily agree with what you're doing, but had some sort of support for the greater good, the movement, for want of a better word. So it was a bit strange because I was only seventeen at the time so I was taken out from this college life, sixth form, and then I was in the papers and it was like 'the ten most wanted men in Britain'. It's very odd, you know, very odd indeed.

LENT

Were you actually involved in the non-payment campaign before?

WRAY

I was involved politically. I was in Militant when it was a socialist Labour party, I was in them for about three weeks when I was fourteen. I gave them up because, Bermondsey was quite a stronghold for them at one point, but I was always more, because my father was a printer, I was involved in Wapping when I was thirteen, fourteen I used to go over there, so that was my background.* So for me after 1986/87, after the print strike, when it got round to Trafalgar Square and the situation degenerated into what it was, it was odd because I'd had experience of that before, as a youngster seeing my father getting beaten up. And when I'm outside the South African embassy* and the police attacked, basically that was my impression of what happened, you react in ways because if you've seen something before and you see it again you react in a certain way and then that's taken out of context and it's like you turn into the most wanted man in Britain. And subsequently you go on the run for a little while and then end up coming back and going into jail, and that was really my experience of it, so mine really is the other side of the movement.

Rupert Murdoch's News International group moved its four UK newspapers from Fleet St to Wapping in east London in January 1986, after sacking about 6,000 mainly print workers who were striking over new contracts which included a no-strike clause and flexible working. The new plant used computerised technology and was intended to break the power of the print unions. Wapping was picketed for about a year, with regular and often violent confrontations between pickets and police, and mass demonstrations called on Wednesdays and Saturdays. The unions were not successful in defeating Murdoch's plans and the dispute ended in early 1987.

In South Africa House, on the east side of Trafalgar Square. South African High Commission since South Africa's return to the Commonwealth.

LENT Well, we'll come back to you when we talk a bit about the riot.

BURROWS OK, I'm a sort of political dinosaur, at least I hope I'm not anymore, but I was, because my experience during those years was as a Labour councillor, I mean I'm obviously not any more. I just want to kind of stress that, I was a Labour councillor in Bridgwater, which is a sort of industrial town in a rural county in Somerset. And it touches a bit on what Danny was saying, I think it's very important that the style of campaign and the style of Anti-Poll Tax Union we had there was different partly because of that rural location and, you know I don't want to demonise anything or anybody, but because we had no Militant Tendency politics there.

Now I think the fact that we were able to set up a grassroots, spontaneous, dynamic organisation, and it was a very successful Anti-Poll Tax Union in Bridgwater, has to be partly because of that. Bridgwater is a town of 30,000 people and I was at the time one of six Labour councillors on a Tory-controlled district council so you can imagine that was a great deal of fun. And I think it's also significant to say that I didn't in any way represent the kind of what's laughingly called the career politician. I was at the rump end of that kind of seventies idea that if you got good left wingers, which I like to think I was, onto the local councils we could do things, we could change things. I think I was coming, by the time the poll tax was introduced, to the realisation that we could do bugger all, and it's been proved to have been false dreams since. But nevertheless there I was with a bunch of incredible nonentities trying to run the district council. And so I was, from the beginning probably, on my own.

It has to be said that when the poll tax was first mooted there was quite a lot of co-operation from the Labour party and from local trade unions because the non-payment campaign hadn't reared its head then. So we were having public meetings and I was speaking as a Labour councillor and I wasn't then too much of an outsider.

As far as the council was concerned, I think, you know again these bits of memory are quite hazy, but I think there was quite a long period of time when everyone who was running a local council was kidding themselves that they could actually keep the bill down. I remember that at the end of 1989, or perhaps the beginning of 1990, an interim bill was issued by Sedgmoor District Council. And it was strange because in the year running up to that I had been called, by my colleagues as well as by the Tories, a troublemaker, and I was stirring up trouble because I kept saying 'It's going to be getting on for £400 per person'. And everyone's saying 'don't be so bloody stupid, no way is it going to be anything like that'. And that was actually quite crucial because you see we wouldn't have had such a successful anti-payment campaign if it had been lower.

That's I think, it's a bit cynical to say that, but the justice arguments about the poll tax, the harking back to Wat Tyler,* worked for those of us that were politically conscious but it wouldn't have

Wat Tyler, leader of the 1381 Peasants' Revolt which broke out after the introduction of a poll tax. Killed after exchanging blows with the then Mayor of London.

worked for an anti-payment campaign if it hadn't been for that fact that most people couldn't bloody well pay. And of course those interim bills that came out in Sedgmoor, which I'm still saying, 'this isn't true, this is a lie', were about £250. The bill came out a couple of months later and it was £380 and that was the crunch, I mean that's what really… [Dave Morris comes in] Do you want to pause?

LENT No, no.

DAVE MORRIS Sorry, I thought it was two o'clock till seven.

BURROWS So I mean that was the kind of run up to the issuing of the poll tax bills, that councillors were being very complacent and my colleagues were saying to me 'stop winding people up' and of course it was a bit of a gamble, they could have pulled it back again. Margaret Thatcher* didn't have to be as incredibly stupid as she was.

Margaret Thatcher (Baroness Thatcher of Kesteven), Conservative politician. Prime Minister, 1979-90.

We laugh now but nobody realised then that she was going to make such an incredible blunder, because that's what it was, nobody thought that she was like that, people thought Thatcher was pretty invincible. And everyone thought that somehow she'd help local councils to muddle through with the poll tax. She didn't, she was totally confrontational about it. And of course that's why, that's why we won that victory, because she made a huge tactical error. If she'd kept the poll tax bills down somehow, by another hundred quid, we'd never have had an anti-poll tax campaign and the poll tax would have still been in place.

Nevertheless we went on in Sedgmoor and those of us on the left and in the Labour party in the area, we had a May Day rally in 1988. It was an absolute flop. I mean we thought we'd get loads of people along, we had Martha Osamor* came down from, I think it was Islington,

Martha Osamor, legal adviser, member of the TGWU, TUC Race Relations Committee, Black Women and Europe Network and European Migrants Forum.

MORRIS Haringey.

BURROWS Sorry, Haringey, I am rural, forgive me. But nobody turned out, it was an absolute flop. And that was demoralising, we didn't think we were going to get that momentum going. But nevertheless as the time got nearer and as of course the bills went out, we realised we were actually, for a town like Bridgwater where nothing happens and minds close at a very early time in the evening. For instance, we organised a public meeting, which Danny spoke at, to coincide with the issuing of the bills. And as usual we booked the little hall, which we always booked for political meetings and usually tried to fill as much as we could. And on the day the organiser at the Town Hall phoned me and said 'I think you'd better book the Town Hall, because you're going to have too many people there', and we had a

full Town Hall which has never been known in the history of most people who were at that meeting, as it doesn't happen in Bridgwater.

So you know that was really the sign that the momentum of the campaign was really growing, that people were taking over and it was going to be a dynamic campaign. That of course, and this is to concur with some of the things Danny was saying, that the Militant Tendency who I would, I think some credit needs to be given to the Militant Tendency. I mean the 'can't pay, won't pay' slogan, the idea of Anti-Poll Tax Unions was their idea, but of course they blundered terribly. I mean they are, they were, a bureaucratic organisation and they didn't realise that they were not going to be able to control that spontaneous form of working class organisation. That's a whole debate in itself isn't it, as to where Militant went wrong in that kind of whole assessment. And of course their desperate attempts in the following months to keep control were what Danny is talking about.

As far as I was concerned, as a local councillor of course that was it as you can imagine as far as the Labour group was concerned. From being a sort of tolerated left-winger I was absolutely public enemy number one. Not the most wanted woman in Bridgwater, I don't think that could ever have been my description, but certainly not popular with the Labour group. I in fact resigned from the Labour party at that time, because it seemed to me absolutely incredible that the Labour party should have been saying to people, as they were, this was what the Labour party's message was: 'pay your poll tax and vote Labour, because we will sort it out at the next general election'. Now when you think about that it is incredibly insulting and stupid thing to say to people and no way could I associate myself with it.

So I resigned from the Labour party. I stayed on as a councillor, some people might feel wrongly, because I felt as a leader of the local Anti-Poll Tax Union, I was a leading organiser, I had got a role to play as a councillor. And it was of course quite useful because, and again this to agree with something Danny was saying, that it gave people some confidence to think that somebody who was in that position, being in the local council, who had credibility, and I did have a lot of support, was also leading the non-payment campaign. So I think was quite important. I think there were one or two councillors in Bristol who were in the same situation.

BURNS There were four.

BURROWS So that was something and I got together with them and that was quite good. But from that point of course the leader of the Labour group said, I remember his speech in the council chamber, 'I have some sympathy with those people who cannot afford to pay, however those people who refuse to pay deserve everything that they

are possibly going to get.' So that was the kind of parting shot from the Labour group to me.

So from that time on I was with the Anti-Poll Tax Union and against the Labour group and against the Labour party. We did however try to carry on doing things. I mean what Danny's said about trying to keep a campaign going as inclusively as possible. It was a very important aspect of both the Bridgwater Anti-Poll Tax Union and the South West Federation of Anti-Poll Tax Unions. And we actually had some, we were very firmly in Bridgwater a non-payment Anti-Poll Tax Union, but we had for instance from Campaign Against the Poll Tax, they couldn't accept the principle of non-payment. And we didn't say, as I think Militant Tendency would have liked us to have said 'we don't want anybody who advocates payment'. But we were saying we really need to keep together on this and we needed to use as many tactics. And for instance we had weekly anti-poll tax meetings and we invited solicitors along to talk, useless actually because I don't think they had any advice to give, we found out we had to do it all ourselves but they did their best. We had a vicar in, it seems ludicrous, but I have to say that same vicar decided because of that that he wasn't going to pay his poll tax and got into, I was going to say the pulpit, whatever you call it in the magistrates' court, and preached a sermon. The magistrates couldn't stop him because they'd never had this happen to them.

Those kind of funny things came out of it. I mean we had for instance, we had an Anti-Poll Tax Union skittles team, you want to live in Bridgwater to know how important that is for life in Bridgwater. Our Anti-Poll Tax Union went and played skittles and we went and did quiz teams and we won the religious quiz at the local church quiz. Things like that, we were actually taking part in the life of the town.

And I think that sort of dynamic, confident, lively, funny, event – I mean we bricked up a bailiff's house. One May Day we marched out to a village called Nempnett Thrubwell.* The Militant Tendency and the Socialist Workers party said that was a diversion from the politics of the Anti-Poll Tax Union. But we marched with Class War, we took a vote with Class War – that's never been known before – we had a democratic vote with Class War about whether or not we were going to smash the windows first. We won the vote that we weren't going to smash the windows, and Class War grumbled a bit but they went along with it.

In north Somerset, near Blagdon Lake. The march took place on 1 May 1991 to the home of Mr Roach, owner of a Bristol-based bailiff company.

So we had this kind of wonderful democratic movement and lots of fun and lots of activity and I think one of the things that, if you say 'What did you learn from it all?' is that politics is so boring, and working class people are never going to gain confidence from politics if we can't make it good fun, matey, democratic and instead of the kind of ritualised boring meetings and the ideology that most of us have had to suffer that have been active.

I'm sorry if I'm probably going on a bit too long. I did just did want to say that I think it is important, I haven't thought about this for a

good many years and I'm ashamed that I haven't, and this is a wonderful opportunity and it's going to change, I'm going to think about it now, honestly I am.

So all of this is coming off the top of my head, it could be much better organised but I really think it was very important. For me of course personally it was farewell to the Labour party. So that was an important political event for me. I mean I spent 15 wasted years in it. It seems daft now but honestly people like me, idiots like me, believed that as long as we worked very, very hard, Militant believed it of course, they were in the Labour Party for a long time, if we worked really, really hard, did the right things and spent our lives, we'd save the Labour party for the working class. What a load of shite, but that was the turning point for me. Of course it couldn't have ever happened, it never will happen, I mean it should never have been foisted upon us.

The other thing that was important for me was this learning that you can have spontaneous working class organisations, as long as you steer clear of the dead hand of Labour party, TUC and I have to say of bureaucratic left wing organisations because I think they can be just as dire in terms of working class people developing the confidence to struggle. And the other thing of course is that you never know what's round the corner. That seems such a crude political principle but it's actually one that's meant a lot to me. Because it's bloody hard. I'm an active trade unionist and sometimes, people will know what I'm talking about here, you wonder why and whether it's worth going on. But the fact is you never know what's just round the corner and the poll tax campaign was just around the corner and it was amazing and I have never had such an experience as that.

But I think the other perhaps serious thing that it taught me. I believe that I and, I don't know what Danny's analysis is, but I think people like me make a big mistake, it was the first time I'd had that sort of successful mass campaign. And I was there involved in it and that's a very heady and very dangerous thing to happen. And it can actually make you not realise, forget revolutionary politics, and forget the need sometimes to think strategically. And there was a point I think quite late on in the Anti-Poll Tax Union when we should have raised much more sharply the issue of what comes next. Taking on a campaign, a long-term campaign of resistance and because we didn't want to destroy that rather nice, fragile unity that we thought we had and because it was working so well I think we didn't push it enough. Sometimes in those sorts of situations, to be a revolutionary, if you think that is important, and I do, it means you've got to sometimes take quite a sharp decision about facing issues like that and we didn't, and we lost it.

Nevertheless I mean the poll tax campaign was a victory and there weren't many victories to be had. So I think the overall feeling I had was that we missed an incredible opportunity that perhaps won't come again. Sorry if I've spoken too long.

LENT No, that was great, thank you very much.

BURNS Can I just pick up on that last point?

LENT Yes, sure.

BURNS Because Glen and I were just talking, musing on that briefly before we started, and there were two key points that which I thought we should have done something differently. One was in the immediate aftermath of the demonstration itself, when I and some of the people round this table were saying really strongly, after that demonstration, we should have called another one within two weeks. And we should have had that sort of eastern European continuous demonstration feeling. We could have pulled it off then. And I think that was possibly a critical moment where, if you like some of the influences of Militant in particular, made that more difficult. And because of that resistance we didn't push it and I think we could have possibly got away with it. It's difficult to know whether we would have got away with it, but I think we should have tried.
The second thing was, in Bristol a number of us talked about this but I think probably at a too-early stage, which is the whole issue of what do we do with all of the money. A lot of people were not paying. We started to think about an alternative taxation system in that those who could pay could pay into a trust and then we could start thinking about how we ran our own services, and so on and so forth. But the trouble was that the thinking about that came too early on in the campaign before the trust had built, before the movement had built and so on and so forth. And by the time it was right to do that we were so engaged with the campaign itself, which is what Glen was saying, and it was taking over our whole lives. We were engaged in meetings every night and so on and so forth. It was very difficult to get that clarity of long-term vision. But those are the sorts of things I think we could have been thinking about, and many other things besides.

LENT Dave Morris is here now, so just to tell him we're talking firstly about the non-payment campaign and its organisation and then we're going to move on to the issues about the demonstration in Trafalgar Square after that.

MORRIS Is Tony Wood not come in from Haringey?

North London borough. Includes Tottenham, Wood Green, Highgate.

LENT No, he dropped out a couple of days ago.

MORRIS I can talk a bit about Tottenham and Haringey anyway.

LENT If you can do that, I was going to ask you if you wanted to come in now.

MORRIS Now?

LENT Well if you want to talk about your involvement in the campaign, it's up to you.

MORRIS Well, very briefly, I haven't really prepared properly but the good thing is that we've done our own pamphlet in Haringey, 'History of the Anti-Poll Tax Campaign', and you can have a copy for a quid each, which basically says everything that I'm likely to say anyway. So you might as well take one and give it back later on. You don't have to read it now because otherwise it won't be oral history, it will be written history.

Very briefly, I think we were one of the first non-payment groups set up in the London area, if not the first, I'm not sure. But we had a very active, we had some very active autonomous groups active in the area already in Tottenham, who were very interested in fighting against the poll tax. And I was involved in the Claimants' Union, and we were one of the main groups in the Claimants' Union that was involved with the Federation of Claimants' Unions. We organised conferences and camps and stuff. And we had a lot of contact with Claimants' Unions in Scotland, who of course were very keen on the anti-poll tax campaign, and on non-payment issues in general, because claimants were always fighting the next bills and trying to avoid paying them if you possibly could get away with it.

So we got going pretty early on and we were quite instrumental in setting up the London Federation of Anti-Poll Tax Groups which was, there was previously a London group that wasn't committed to the non-payment campaign, which basically collapsed as soon as the Non-Payment Federation was set up, involving all groups in London and we were the secretarial group. In fact I was the secretary of the London Federation of Anti-Poll Tax Groups.

But in Haringey, I mean it's funny, I was going to say some brilliant analysis about the context and vision and confidence and all kinds of stuff. But the poll tax movement was so huge in its scope and implications, it's really hard to kind of get a grip on specific things to say in ten minutes. But I think vision was very important. From our very first meeting, 'Tottenham Against the Poll Tax', our aim was to have a representative in every street, and to be able to leaflet every door in Tottenham, and it later became Haringey-wide. Haringey is about 90,000 houses and quite early on we did 90,000 leaflet-posters, so that people could put up the poster, read the leaflet, why you should not pay, why we're all sticking together, why we're going to win. And on the other side it said 'Pay No Poll Tax'. And that was delivered to every door in Haringey, which obviously was quite a big effort. But at the same time it generated a lot more

street reps, a lot more contacts, a lot more energy.

And we went from there onwards, feeling that it was very important to get to everybody and to show everybody that they had the support of an organised movement. And then we encouraged local groups setting up, we had about 20 local groups at the best, at the highest point, around Haringey, in fact a lot of it is in Danny's excellent book* which I'm sure he's mentioned already. And I'm sure we're not much different from other places around the country.

Poll Tax Rebellion, see note p.18 above.

From the very beginning we decided we weren't going to do petitions, that they were a complete waste of time. That we were going to have a non-payment pledge, so that anyone who signed a document was signing that they weren't going to pay and they would support other non-payers, rather than lobbying the authorities.

I've just cut out the stuff that probably happened anywhere else. Because we were a very independent group we were quite instrumental in. and not only in the London Federation but also setting up, in fact with Danny and some other people around the country, a national list of anti-poll tax groups. And then later up at Trafalgar Square, in helping to set up the Trafalgar Square Defendants Campaign.

I think that you can't separate the Trafalgar Square Defendants Campaign and what happened at Trafalgar Square from the vibrancy of the grassroots movement all round the country. And that's one thing I think that we've all got to learn, is that the most exciting movements are movements which are actually outside of anyone's control, because they're real movements they're not just like fronts for political tendencies.

I won't go on much more about Tottenham and Haringey except to say that, just taking on from what you said, is that we did start having discussions before the anti-poll tax campaign was clearly going to be over, because we were winning, in fact we'd won. And rather than just see the groups fold, which would have been the aim of every political party that had been slightly involved in the anti-poll tax movement in Haringey. They would rather see every single issue movement fold and then be replaced by something else. And they're the only coherent carriers of a broad approach so you have to join a party to be active generally politically. And we decided that we were going to transform the anti-poll tax groups into local solidarity organisations and to support all issues and campaigns and whatever. Which is what we did, and because, in my pinion, left-wing parties were actually marginal to the anti-poll tax movement in Haringey, we were able to create something long term which still exists today. Which is Haringey Solidarity Group, which is a network of activists which is involved in different campaigns and issues in Haringey.* In fact myself I'm concentrating on my local estate and I think that at the end of the day that's what really counts, is your immediate neighbour not even your borough or town. I've been involved with the residents' group for the last couple of years.

See their website, http://hsg.cupboard.org/, for further details.

Finally I'd just like to say that, in terms of the legacy of the anti-poll tax movement, one thing that's quite important for me is, I later got to McDonalds and was involved in a very long trial, the longest in English history, the McLibel case.* And me and Helen were both very active in Tottenham against the poll tax, and I think the legacy of the movement is to inspire future struggles. And most important about the anti-poll tax campaign was it was a movement of defiance against an oppressive law. And that's exactly the kind of approach that we took to the libel laws trying to suppress public dissent. And also of course it was not just theoretically against an oppressive law. The anti-poll tax movement was successful, it involved court cases, it involved people defending themselves, it involved turning the courts into a public tribunal where the poll tax was on trial when non-payers went to court, rather than the poll tax non-payers themselves. So I think you know all that. I benefited greatly from that, I'm sure other movements have as well.

The McLibel case, as it came to be known, began in 1990 when McDonald's decided to sue five Greenpeace activists for libel over a leaflet they distributed called 'What's Wrong with McDonalds'. Dave Morris and Helen Steel fought the case, which lasted 1994-7; they lost but the judge ruled that their allegations about cruelty to animals and low wages had been proved.

LENT

Thank you very much. Taking up on that point, the work I do is as an historian in a way of social movements in Britain. And in some way the poll tax was a starting point for a lot of movement activism that went on during the 1990s. I think in some ways, almost in the way that the anti-Vietnam war campaign was for the activists in the 1970s, around the women's movement and the gay liberation etc., I think the poll tax had the same role of bringing people together and almost standing there as a mythical symbolic moment. To have been at Trafalgar Square was a badge of honour really, for the people involved in environmentalist activism and that sort of activism in the 1990s.

I think what we normally do is open it out and people can contribute, talk about their own experiences, or ask any questions they have. So let's just have a general discussion about what's been said and people can also give their own accounts, just talk about what they experienced, as long as it's all on the record that's the main thing. I see Richard wants to say something so we'll start with him.

RICHARD MURGATROYD

Well as you said earlier I am doing a PhD on this, but I was also chairman of the Ealing Anti-Poll Tax Federation. And I just want to pick up on a point Glen made about the importance of location and locale, because I think that's really true and it did determine the nature and the development of particular local campaigns. I mean how would you describe Ealing, the London Borough of Ealing?* It's called the 'queen of the suburbs'; quarter of a million people there, mixed with these shopping centres and straight residential streets interspersed by a few estates, a real social mix. In a way, campaigners said it was like a microcosm of Britain in 1989 and I think there is probably some truth in that. Now, the anti-poll tax campaign in Ealing was very much a campaign of the left. It was formed by the Labour left, many people like yourself left Labour

South-west outer London borough.

due to the experience of the campaign, trade unionists, Greens, Militant, we even had some expatriate Scottish Nationalist Party* members in Ealing, which was a bit weird but they were obviously opposed to the poll tax. But most of all what struck me about the campaign was it involved people who had never been involved in any political activity before. Even people who had voted Conservative, really were quite partisan Conservative supporters in some ways, and that was quite bizarre.

Scottish National Party, founded 1934, campaigns for Scottish independence. It won its first seat at Westminster in 1945.

And the Anti-Poll Tax Union in Ealing established 16 Anti-Poll Tax Unions based on residential areas, estates, and the local hospital where the nurses organised, they all lived in residential accommodation. And that particular Anti-Poll Tax Union lasted all the way through the campaign. Which is more than can be said for a lot of the estate-based ones, which withered away quite quickly. And I want to come back to that because really I want to question some of the things Danny was saying about community, not just today but in your book as well, which is a good book in a lot of ways, I really enjoyed it, but I just want to question this thing about community layer.

But we formed the Federation, and from the outset the Militant, I was a member of Militant myself at the time, actually had quite a controlling position. As I was saying to Adam earlier, what the weird thing about the experience of the poll tax was, it actually provoked – I was the chair and the secretary was also a Militant supporter – as we got involved in it, and it was the first time we'd ever been involved in a mass movement of ordinary people, this Leninism that we'd been brought up on from within the Militant, it just didn't ring true, and we left.

And that experience, in a way you can see how it changed people's politics in that way. I think it's important not to get carried away with this idea of spontaneous community campaigns because what we did in Ealing was, our main task once the poll tax was abolished was defending non-payers, who were threatened with the bailiffs, who were threatened by various legal action. And I have to say that wasn't fun, we found it was like a gruelling marathon where you had to take time off work every week to go and help defend these people. And especially when they started jailing people, and Ealing jailed more debtors than every other London Borough put together.* And you'd see these poor, I mean poor people, and I don't mean that in a derogatory way, I mean people who literally didn't have a brass farthing being sent down for three months and so on in what we called a form of hostage technique.

According to figures given by Home Office Minister David Maclean to the House of Commons on 22 June 1994, across the UK one person was imprisoned for not paying their poll tax in 1990, 113 in 1991, 504 in 1992 and 1,157 in 1993.

It was very grim, but it also was very demanding and you needed skills. You had to have skills to go and help those people, it wasn't enough just to give out leaflets or shout how we all hated the poll tax. That's why I would have to question this thing about community because a lot of those people who hadn't really been involved in politics fell away. Not all of them, some of them stayed, but it was the political activists, the people who had experience, who could organise, who kept the whole thing going and tried to defend

non-payers. So again that's a difference of emphasis.
And just finally, I know I've talked a lot, because the problem is you don't get much chance to talk a lot about your experiences and it's very therapeutic for me. But I just wanted to say, at the end what is there? What is left of the poll tax? When I was interviewing the secretary of the Union Federation, Mick Brooks,* he described the anti-poll tax campaign – he was a lefty, he still is a convinced socialist and so on – he said it was like moving out of the ghetto. For the first time we felt we were moving out of the ghetto and actually connecting with ordinary people in a way that we'd never done before. But after the poll tax campaign ended and began to wind down we went back in the ghetto then. So why is that?

Mick Brooks, left-wing activist. Author of many articles for *Socialist Appeal*, the Workers International League publication.

CHARLES LOFT

Generally what you were saying about your experiences rang true with me, the vibrancy and diversity of the campaign. But I thought Hackney was an interesting contrast to Haringey. Because in Stamford Hill, where I lived, which is part of Hackney,* we had a pretty good Anti-Poll Tax Union set up by a bunch of anarcho-squatters, but involving ordinary people, whoever they are, and leafleted every house. And it was everything I thought was good about the campaign and it was the first time I'd felt part of the community and was involved in politics. But in Hackney as a whole, by the time Stamford Hill got going, Militant had already set up a Hackney Federation, and had their branches, which basically consisted of three Militant members as far as I could see. And then at some point I think quite early on in 1990 the SWP* had a conference and sent its members back to set up their own Anti-Poll Tax Unions, so they could then get representation on the borough committee and outvote Militant. And increasingly after Trafalgar Square, so much energy got wasted on this great long-running battle between the SWP, Militant and the rest. And the rest could never actually agree to work with the SWP in order to get rid of Militant. I just remember going to meeting after meeting and thinking 'this just isn't what I'm interested in'.
And it does seem to me that by the time the poll tax was actually abolished, the campaign in Hackney was actually beginning to wind down already and I think in terms of defending non-payers and in subsequent years, in my experience it just seemed to be absent. And I think that a lot of that had to do with the fact that, yes Militant do deserve some credit because they did set up an initial framework which gave people the confidence to go out and set up their own thing. But then once what they wanted actually happened and the masses were politicised, they not only couldn't cope with it, but didn't want it. They were so desperately trying to hang on to control that most of the energy was dissipated. There was talk about transforming some of the Anti-Poll Tax Unions into more general bill resistance, but by this time the whole campaign was being undermined by all this infighting, and it never really happened. So that seems to me that backs up what Dave was saying about what

London Borough of Hackney, north inner London.

Socialist Workers' Party (SWP), Trotskyite political party formed in the mid-70s. Produces a weekly newspaper called *Socialist Worker*.

was good about Haringey was kind of proved in reverse in Hackney.

The other thing I wanted to say was, that Adam was making the point that, being at Trafalgar Square was as though you got a medal for it or something. And to me it always seemed that it was the end of something, that that campaign came at the end of the eighties when there'd been a lot of other things like the miners' strike* and Wapping, that had a broader political context inherently understood by the people involved in them. And that since then it seemed to me that political resistance has become much more fragmented. And things like the anti-motorway protesters, while I am sure there are people involved in that who have got a wider political agenda, it just seems to me that, not necessarily because of the poll tax or anything, but the nature of politics of resistance has changed somewhat. And the poll tax was really the last time, to my mind, that there was a prominent campaign that had a connection to left-wing politics as a whole. And although those connections still exist, they are perhaps less ideological and more to do with individuals.

The long and unsuccessful miners' strike of 1984-5, against proposed pit closures, led by the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) under its president, Arthur Scargill. The British economy was no longer so dependent on coal (which had in any case been stockpiled before the strike) and the Thatcher government was determined to defeat them. After the miners' strike, new laws restricting industrial action (e.g. requiring ballots and not allowing secondary picketing) were passed.

GARETH PROSSER Can I just say, because I have to go? I came back to London in late 1988, early 1989. My experience then was very much a re-coalescence – this was in Brent and in south-east London – very much a re-coalescence of the miners' strike groups. I didn't experience it as this vast new upwelling, just about everybody I knew who was involved, had been involved in the campaign around the miners' strike.

TIM JORDAN I apologise for being late. Has someone spoken about Scotland, from a Scottish perspective?

LENT They haven't actually, no.

JORDAN I arrived in this country, I'm Australian, I arrived in this country in September 1988, in Edinburgh, to be honest exhausted after quite a long time being involved in politics in Melbourne and looking for a rest. And wandered in, all the people I knew who were like me were involved in the poll tax. And I became a marginal participant in the poll tax in Britain so a lot of the things that you're saying are things that I wasn't involved in. I wasn't particularly involved in any of the campaigns, in any of the higher organisations. I was involved in leafleting, a bit of talking to people on the doorstep, and I suppose I have a couple of things just to add, and this may have been said before, I am sorry if it's repetition.

One of the things that struck me about it was, why it was such a successful campaign, was that what you were asking people to do was not to spend money. And it was very easy to bob up on people's doorsteps, and the group I became involved in, because I was

South Edinburgh area, near the university, where many students live.

part of the university, was the middle class area of Edinburgh, Marchmont,* for anyone who knows Edinburgh. But you could roll up to these doorsteps and say, 'We think it's a really good idea, it's a really strong political statement if you keep your money in your pocket. If anything happens to you we'll come round and help to feed you', 'Oh that sounds good'. And I found that at that low level participation there were some strong reasons why the mass element of them worked quite well, in a way which other campaigns faced much greater difficulty in doing.

Second thing is that, I don't feel really qualified to speak on a Scottish perspective, except for the fact that I was there through the period. And clearly there was already a lot of Scottish nationalism which was rumbling before 1988. But the poll tax, people I knew and all the debates I was part of, it was very much expressed by Scottish people as being the last straw, being experimented on, doing it a year early in Scotland to see just what's happening.* The general perception was the Conservatives didn't give a monkey's about Scotland anyway, because they weren't winning any seats there, and in the end the election two years later they didn't win any seats.

The poll tax was introduced in Scotland on 1 April 1989, a year before it came into effect in England and Wales.

So it really fuelled Scottish nationalism and tied up with that was the revitalisation or revision of the Scottish Nationalist party.* Which a lot of people I knew in the liberal left would previously not have had a lot to do with. Previously Scottish nationalism was at times quite right wing, looking back into the 1950s and 1960s, flirting with racism at times –

In 1988 the Scottish National Party won the Govan by-election, and in the 1992 general election it received 21.5% of the Scottish vote, though it won no seats.

LENT Tartan Tories

JORDAN And the poll tax was a time when a time when the Scottish National Party was part of it revitalising itself and reinventing itself as sort of lefty force which is how it's managed to re-present itself in Scotland and become able to compete with Labour in Scotland in a way it could never have done. I was in Scotland until 1993 and I just don't remember the poll tax riot, the Trafalgar demonstration, having anywhere near the same significance or importance in Scotland. And the point you said about badge of courage, I know lots of people who were, who've got greatly loved pictures out of it and have posters about that but it wasn't the same thing. And there was a sense of that being an English-centric if not London-centric view of how the poll tax campaign went.

I found a certain amount of Scottish arrogance, or egocentrism came out as well. A sense of 'well we've been doing this longer than you have, and so you had a riot, we've been fighting invaders for longer' this sort of Braveheart* mentality that lurks under the surface sometimes in Scotland. So I just wanted to add those to the sort of experiences I went through as a marginal participant.

Braveheart, 1995 film directed by Mel Gibson about William Wallace leading 13th century Scots against English rule.

LENT

Steve Nally, the Militant London activist who was the Secretary of the 'All-Britain Anti-Poll Tax Federation.' With Tommy Sheridan (Chair of the Federation, now a Scottish Socialist Party MSP), immediately after the riot he condemned troublemakers who had sabotaged a peaceful demonstration.

Well we did ask Tommy Sheridan to come and give us both a Militant and a Scottish perspective, but obviously he's much too busy. Unfortunately Steve Nally is not here or he might have given us a Militant perspective.* I think before I come back to people I just wanted to say a couple of things, and maybe put my own witness statement on the record as well, because I think there's a side that may be slightly missed and give a slightly wrong perspective. Of course lots and lots of people were involved in the non-payment campaign who weren't involved on a daily organisational basis. People who simply didn't pay and generally supported the campaign and I suppose in some ways I was one of those. And I was very politically active in anti-racism stuff and on the left of the Labour party, but I wasn't involved in the anti-poll tax campaign.

I went along to one Anti-Poll Tax Union meeting, which as far as I can remember was Haringey, and I always remember there were about five people there and a couple of Militants and a couple of more anarchist types having an argument. I think it must have been quite early in the campaign.

MORRIS

It probably wasn't Haringey

LENT

Oh it probably wasn't Haringey then. I remember thinking well this looks pretty dire. I was actually writing, doing some journalism then and I remember phoning up someone from Militant, I think, and speaking to them on the phone. And them saying 'The next big thing we're planning is the anti-poll tax campaign and we think this will be the biggest civil society movement in the twentieth century history of Britain'. And I remember thinking 'What an arse, there's no way that's going to happen' – but he was right.

I think movements that size also play a big part in other aspects of peoples lives, completely unexpected aspects of people's lives. And actually I'd completely forgotten this until we're sitting here talking about it, that in 1989 I ended up without somewhere to live for a while and was desperately looking for somewhere to live. And ended up finding a squat in Hackney. I lived there for two years. It was a complete wreck, we did it up, and it's still a squat in Hackney now, still being squatted and used ten, eleven years on. And the reason we found that was because of the poll tax campaign. A couple of friends of mine who were active in the poll tax campaign in Hackney were going around telling people not to pay the poll tax and telling them about the campaign. And they got into a discussion with a woman who said 'Oh, there's an empty property upstairs and its' been empty for years and I think the GLC owned it once', and that's how we found it, through the poll tax campaign. So things like that can come in to play a part.

The other things I remember, just a couple of reflections. I remember one of the big discussions we used to have, me and my friends, we all assumed we weren't going to pay, I mean we just weren't

going to pay. But the big discussion we had was about whether you register your name on the electoral roll, or not. I think people have forgotten that a bit, that was an issue, because I remember myself thinking that well you should put your name on the electoral roll. Because although it means you might get caught for not registering, or not paying, you still felt you shouldn't be frightened off having the right to exercise your right to vote, be on the electoral roll. Where there were other people in this squat I was living in who just said 'I'm not going to be on the electoral roll because I'm too frightened of getting caught'. And of course I remember the councils and the Government at the time saying the electoral roll would never be used as a way of collecting the poll tax, but we didn't believe them for a minute.*

On 19 June 1991 the *Guardian* reported that more than one million voters had disappeared from the electoral register since the poll tax had been announced, and that the number of teenagers registering in advance of their 18th birthday had fallen by 11% in the previous year.

And just one other thing was, of course a lot of this was also happening at the same time as what was going on in eastern Europe and the 1989 uprisings and revolutions there, and into 1990. And there seemed to be links there. I think you [Danny Burns] mentioned that you thought maybe that you could, by having another demonstration two weeks later, you could continue that, have an eastern European style uprising. And it did seem that there was suddenly revolution in the air and that was quite exciting. So it was a backdrop to a lot of people's lives even though they weren't necessarily involved directly in the organisation.

OK, I think what I'll do is I'll get some comments back from people who have spoken already, and so Danny do you want to come back with some things?

BURNS

At a demonstration in Bristol on 6 March 1990, 26 people were arrested and both police and demonstrators injured.

The first one is just an aside about the big riot itself and the references to Scotland that we heard earlier, because I think it's really important not to forget how significant the local riots were which took place everywhere, in Bristol, in Leeds, in all sorts of places.* And in a sense they were the precursors to what happened in Trafalgar Square, I don't think what happened in Trafalgar Square probably would have happened without that sort of energy being built up before hand. And I think for me that says something about what I was saying before about the interconnectedness of all of these things, that the non-payments stuff, the local riots, the big riot. All of these things were mutually reinforcing and they were all part of the picture that was important.

I would just like to address the issues about 'community': it's something I struggled with in thinking about this when I wrote the book at the time. I think the first thing to say is, although let's not get hung up on community itself, because what we are really talking about is the importance of ordinary people, but at the time we are thinking about, this is a community-based campaign, as opposed to a political party campaign, or a trade union-led campaign although clearly all were involved. And I think what we have to look at is that the reality was that most people at the time felt betrayed by the political parties. And most people at the time, although there were

lots of people who were in trade unions, found it very difficult to get their trade unions to organise with them.

Now that wasn't totally the case, I mean we also had the Bristol nurses doing some really good stuff, and there was work outside some of the factories in Easton, and all sorts of stuff. There was activity around the trade unions, but we really struggled to get trade unions to come behind the campaign. So in a sense the analysis comes from that history, rather than from the intellectual position that community is the way forward.

And I think the reality of it is about community, these communities are difficult beasts, if you like, and they don't hang together in quite the same way as an organisation does. But I think in response, in something like this, somebody said earlier on about involving ordinary people, that the Anti-Poll Tax Unions involved ordinary people. I think much more than that, in areas where there was a real groundswell, like Bristol, they didn't involve ordinary people, they were completely comprised of ordinary people. And the people that were political activists in a sense were the exception. There were political activists, and they did bring their skills, and I wouldn't underestimate the skills that those people brought, I think that's really important. But actually the political activists often had less skills, and actually the skills that were needed were the diverse skills, which came from Green party activists and people who'd been involved in direct action, and people who'd been involved in left wing political parties and people who'd been involved in trade unions and so on and so forth.

I think where you had organisations that weren't able to sustain themselves was where you had one particular set of skills which wasn't necessarily appropriate to this mass movement that was building. And we found that we had printers in our Anti-Poll Tax Unions that were generating leaflets. We had people who had skills around computers who could do our mailing lists. We generated masses of skills which weren't anywhere near the political parties. And I think there can be a really patronising attitude, and I don't attribute that to you at all, but there can be a real patronising attitude that says, 'you know, all those people who have been in political parties for years have got the skills and they know how to do it, and all those people that have actually got hundreds of skills but that have never been recognised, don't know how to do it.'

And the reality for me is that it was those groups that were made up of ordinary people that sustained themselves, and that may not have been the case throughout the whole country, but it was the case in Bristol. It was groups like the Easton Anti-Poll Tax Union that had 500 members that were having 50 to 60 people to every meeting over three years, and maybe ten per cent of which had had a political history, that were the really strong ones. But I can't say that that goes for the whole country, or even for all the Anti-Poll Tax Unions in Bristol.

JONES Danny, before we go on to somebody else can I just ask you to just tell us a little bit of biography? What was your own background in politics before you got involved, and do you think that you do have a predisposition in your own political beliefs that is perhaps colouring your views of community politics in this context, as you look back?

BURNS My background I guess starts from when I was about 15 reading *Socialist Worker* and taking it to school, goes to a very very brief membership of the Labour party when I was at college for about four months.

JONES And that was where?

BURNS At college, I was at LSE.*

London School of Economics, part of the University of London.

JONES What was happening at the LSE when you were there and how does that lead into …

BURNS Well there is some link in the sense I was very actively involved in anti-nuclear and CND* politics at the time, and very involved in direct action campaigns, and was involved in co-ordinating direct action campaigns around nuclear industries around that time. I left the Labour party for probably the same reasons in many respects as a lot of people left the Labour party during the anti-poll tax campaign, just because of a sense that it wasn't working for people. And after that I wasn't really involved politically in any organised sense until the anti-poll tax campaign, although I had sympathies, I'd been involved in squatting as well, but not in a political sense, in a sort of living sense.

Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, founded in February 1958.

But I don't have any illusions about community, and I think communities can work very well and not at some times, and not at all well at other times. And I think it's really important to be clear that communities have, particularly in the sort of mixed context that you're talking about, are a very mixed process, and community can be as damaging as it can be liberating. Lots of racism takes place in the name of community, for example. But I think at that time it was critical to mobilise from a base of ordinary people at a local level, and the geographical base was really important, just being local and talking to your neighbours. And people have talked about street reps and I think street reps were absolutely critical in this process because they gave people a constant reference point back.

And a lot of it was about trust. I remember something that we did in Eastern, which I think was the linchpin of the whole thing in that particular locality. Which was, I mentioned this in the book, but I can't stress highly enough the importance of it. We did a door-to-

door survey of about 600 people, like a questionnaire just literally talking to people. And we asked them, you know, if other people in your area wouldn't pay the poll tax would you also not pay the poll tax? Giving them a sense of trust, but we didn't just go away, we compiled all the information. And then we went back and talked to exactly the same people and said, 'well actually 70 per cent of the people in your street have said, as a result of this, that they're not going to pay the poll tax'. And that was really important because they were like 'Ah, now I know I've got some solidarity and I know it's local. I don't know all these people but I do know because I trust the people in the Anti-Poll Tax Union to come back with that information.' It's that real local work which was so important in building that trust.

BURROWS

Yes, I don't like to use the word community because I prefer the word class because I think we are talking about a time in our history when interests united on class lines. I think that's to me more important, because community introduces notions about people living hand-in-hand and if you live on the same street as someone then your interests are the same.

So I didn't want to get into that, but my experience of being in the Labour party, and something that changed me during the anti-poll tax campaign, was that all the people, all of the types of organisation we've mentioned, it's not just that people find them dull and boring, they actually don't trust them. I mean nobody ever trusted the Labour party when I was a member of it. It was always difficult to get people involved in campaigns, because they didn't really trust politicians and neither do they trust left-wing bureaucratic organisations. That's to me the most important thing.

And I think we have to have the confidence now to say that those organisations actually held working class people back, in confidence in expressing struggle and in organising themselves, and for a brief moment in time we actually saw that not happening. And that's not to say the Anti-Poll Tax Union, the anti-poll tax movement heralded this kind of suddenly the upward surge of the working class, but it actually provided a brief glimpse of what it might be, only what it might be.

And I think we shouldn't be surprised that it didn't get any further because it was a single-issue campaign. Most people got involved with it because it was a single-issue campaign because it meant they didn't have to think any further than beating the poll tax. The English working class, and perhaps the British working class, but the English working class as far as I am concerned has got no bloody confidence in its own experience, no confidence in its ability to struggle. The most common thing that used to be said to me when I was a councillor is 'Oh you can't do anything, you know you'll never achieve anything'. And for that brief time we actually said 'yes you can', like your McLibel case,* amazing odds but actually you can win, and that's very important.

Dave Morris and Helen Steel's, see note above, p.30.

But it was never going to be any more at that stage than a single issue campaign, because those of us that are left the debris afterwards hadn't got the skill or experience to have know then how to take it any further forward. But the other thing I just did want to say, and I think the thing about people hanging onto the campaign because it's actually nice not to have to pay out money. I catch what you're thinking, but I think that's slightly cynical. I have to say to you as a working class person myself, I was brought up to pay my taxes, wrongly, stupidly, the working class in this country have always paid more than their fair share of taxes. But I think you mustn't ignore that for a large number of people, and I'm one of them, not paying our taxes was actually quite difficult. And I think a lot of working class people that I knew in Bridgewater, I mean there's the scallies* and God bless them, they were great, there's always going to be the people who have got the guts to not pay their taxes. But actually for me, and large numbers of people that I met and worked with, and struggled with, were actually people for whom it was a big decision, not to pay. I've never done it in my life before, probably never have the guts to do it again, and I don't think you should underestimate that. People took that argument on, that not paying was acting in solidarity, even if they could afford to. Of course there were the people who thought they would have a bit more money in their pockets and that was the only thing that mattered, but that wasn't the mainspring certainly for me of the local campaigns.

Scally: a rascal, abbreviation of 'scallywag'.

The other thing I just wanted to quickly say, is that I think one of the important lessons for me of Trafalgar Square that we haven't touched on, is the issue of violence. Because a significant difference – every political struggle I've ever been involved in has involved at some stage a clash, the media run riot and expect it, and then the servants of the state step in, as they did after Trafalgar Square. And you have to include the Militant Tendency because they stepped in to condemn the violence as clearly and as treacherously as did any other part of the state. But the really weird thing, and I've never known this before, and it's not happening now, after June the 18th* for instance, is that people – I was waiting with bated breath after that, the newspapers had reported violence, and I'm thinking people would come up and say 'This bloody Anti-Poll Tax Union that you've got us involved in, look what they've bloody well done.' Not a whisper, people didn't say 'Bloody great', but people were actually so determined to stay with the campaign that they actually overlooked the violence.

On 18 June 1999 there was a worldwide anti-capitalist day of protest. In London a day-long carnival turned into a riot when a McDonalds was attacked, the London Futures Exchange broken into, and police on horseback charged at demonstrators.

That's an incredible thing I think, because I think the issue of violence is something we have to look at in English politics and how people react to it and the fact it's an inevitable part of every successful struggle. I'm not advocating it necessarily, but it's inevitable, but the fact that people supported us. I'd be interested to know what your experience was from people who knew you, Robert. But my experience was certainly that people like me didn't get any condemnation at all.

LENT I think we'll come on to that in a bit because I think there's a whole interesting debate in itself around Trafalgar Square, what happened afterwards and we'll come on to that in a bit. I think Tim just wanted to come in?

JORDAN No, no, I just wish to defend myself and just to complicate the story in two ways, which is I wasn't trying to lay weight on the non-payment of money, although I think it was a factor. It was that to participate you didn't have to do anything. You could add weight to the movement by doing nothing. And I think there was a certain amount of strength in that, that a lot of people could participate, and feel like they were part of the poll tax movement by not doing anything. It's not necessarily cynically feeling you've got more money because in a way it doesn't feel like you've got more money, because it didn't add to the amount of money you had, it just stopped some money being taken away. So I don't think it was necessarily that cynical feeling.

I'm just trying to register that while there was a tremendous amount of activism, and people being active and doing things, there was also a level of the poll tax where to get a third of the people not paying the tax, which is what Scotland possibly got, you didn't have a million people turning out to Scottish demonstrations, or a million people going to poll tax meetings or whatever. And that large portion of people that were just doing nothing, even given that it's a choice and you have to think it through and make the principled decision to do nothing, that's different to having to make a principled decision to go to meetings, to go to demonstrations, to stand in front of all those laws, whatever.

The second thing, and again not necessarily to contradict, but to complicate the stories, that hasn't come up is that there was a big split and argument within the movement I remember in Scotland about whether to campaign against the local authority collecting it, or whether to continue the non-payment campaign and focus on community and ordinary people and just deal with whatever the council decided to do. Because there was a big campaign, certainly in Edinburgh, around trying to convince the council, or there was a split in the movement about what we did. And there were a lot of people who went off to try and convince the council to do nothing, so I'm just trying to complicate this story.

LENT I think we're going to break for coffee just before we talk about the demonstration so I'll just take Richard, and Dave wanted to say something. So I'll just let Dave come in first.

MORRIS I've got a few little notes and stuff. I think non-payment, and you're absolutely right that, and I agree with you that for some people, maybe for 50 per cent of people who didn't pay, it was a difficult decision. But an easier decision than going to a meeting or going on

a demonstration or doing something physical to take part in the movement. Non-payment was a lot easier than anything else as a base for a mass movement. And we've seen for a long time, it's almost like a strike traditionally is an easy thing to do compared to many other forms of activity. Because you can just not go to work. As long you're all not going to work at the same time you've got the basis of a fight. I'm not saying it's easy to go on strike but it has a kind of mass character to it like a non-payment campaign.

I was going to say that, two things about it. First of all, that it was a countable thing. Every so often in Haringey or in Tottenham we would issue figures from the council about 'there's now 50,000 not paying', 'it's gone up to 97,000'. We had 97,000 at our highest point, and that was the figure we blasted over every leaflet, so that people could see 'fuck me, it's like tens of thousands of people, it's not just a few anarchos exaggerating that revolution's around the corner'. So that's good, it was countable. But also something else about non-payment that was important was the non-registration campaign in Haringey, it was a really big thing for us, that people didn't register. Not just not register to vote but not register for the poll tax, so we had a year run in before non-payment where it was some phenomenal figure, I don't know what the figure was, but some huge percentage that didn't register for the poll tax.* And that was the run in before the non-payment campaign got off the ground. So that was that.

See note above, p.36.

I think there was also, talking about the run up to why this movement became so big. There were glimpses of and there were similarities with what happened in the eighties, certainly with the miners' strike support movement, which was a movement that was outside any party control. Both parties were involved in it. And it was a kind of locally based movement of people setting up groups in each locality and that kind of stuff. Also, there was the huge movement against the instalment of missiles, massive marches and big camps and blockades of military bases, which I've been slightly involved in. Which was a defiance movement, it wasn't a movement that was lobbying authorities, it was trying to stop the installation of missiles by mass mobilisation and direct action.

A couple more points I want to make. I think that this division between activists and ordinary people, so-called ordinary people, there is an element of truth in it, but it's exaggerated. A lot of activists are actually worse than useful in that they're part of the bureaucratic, state-focused left-wing tradition, which can be very off-putting and destructive, and not successful which is even worse. But also, many so-called ordinary people are assumed to be not politically active but in fact they are active in many ways. They talk to their neighbours, a lot of people talk to their neighbours, or have people in their family that are active, or they come from countries where there is a lot more grassroots tradition, continuing grassroots tradition of political involvement and community involvement and stuff like that. And I think that it is true that for us in Haringey it was the meetings and the organising was largely done by activists.

So there is that kind of, not split, but difference, between activists and the majority of people. For us the poll tax campaign was not a mass spontaneous campaign where people were rioting up in every street. But at the same time there was that relationship between the population and movement which I can't, I don't know the answer to that.

And the last point I want to make is that people talked about Militant setting up a framework. Our experience in London is that Militant virtually didn't exist for the first six months to a year of the campaign. And they took a decision in the summer of 1989 to join the anti-poll tax movement. We already had the London Federation of Anti-Poll Tax Groups. And then within five minutes, well in fact within six weeks, suddenly there were dozens of Anti-Poll Tax Unions springing up all over London. And then there was a big split in the London Federation because they obviously had their own agenda, they didn't set up the groups until Militant decided to, then they set up the groups, and then there ended up being two Federations and then we, so-called, united, but that's another story.* But the point is that I don't think Militant, in my experience, had any constructive involvement, although I must say that members of Militant who worked in Anti-Poll Tax Unions probably did a lot of good work on the ground. But as an organisation it was quite destructive.

The Militant-controlled federation was known as the London Steering Group of Anti-Poll Tax Unions.

MURGATROYD I think our experience in Ealing was the same in terms of building confidence. You know, we'd publish leaflets saying 'you are not alone there are 48,000 other people blah de blah.' But just one issue that struck me about the way the language of anti-poll tax, the rhetoric, the language we used to oppose the poll tax, it changed, because after a while we simply stopped denouncing the poll tax, because it wasn't ...

MORRIS Assumed everyone was against it

MURGATROYD It just wasn't necessary, if there ever was a popular consensus in British politics it was then, it was that everyone hated the poll tax. I can remember going to meetings, and speaking at meetings where you'd have a hundred tenants from an estate, and they didn't want you to sit there talking about the poll tax. What they wanted you to talk about is, what would happen if they didn't pay the poll tax. And you'd have to give this information in the way that was – you know it's quite a complicated legal process. And you had to give it in a way that rang true and would give them comfort -

JORDAN In a very responsible way

MURGATROYD

Yeah because at the end of the day I actually agree with Glen, I don't think there was, there's always been scallies in this world, but most people I think understand that you do have to pay taxes to some extent, that's what I believe anyway, personally, others might not agree. And I think that most people didn't take the idea of non-payment lightly and they did it because they fundamentally objected to the poll tax. Now why was that?

I just wanted to talk about something no-one's mentioned and that's putting this campaign in its proper historical context. Because what we had was the end of the eighties, we had this idea that Thatcherism was totally extreme, that this woman was going round saying there is no such thing as society, that the NHS and vital public services were being dismantled. And clearly there's plenty of evidence to say, I'm thinking here of the British Social Attitude Surveys* and so on, that the vast majority of the people, right from the working class up to the middle class, had similar sorts of ideals and beliefs about the role of the state as it existed in the consensus era, after 1945.* And that's why the tax, the poll tax, it made real all their concerns about Thatcherism, because it was saying 'Yes, everyone has to pay, the Duke has to pay the same as the dustman and that's right, that's fair'. But that didn't ring true to people, and that's why it was such an emotive issue. And that's why people were prepared to not pay it and I think it's important to put it in its historical context as well. Would the same happen today, I don't know?

Begun in 1983, the British Social Attitudes Survey is conducted each year by the National Centre for Social Research, and includes questions on attitudes to work and unemployment, the welfare state, civil liberties and politics.

Consensus: the idea that there was a core of agreement between the different political parties after 1945 about such issues as the welfare state. Many historians contest this view (see H. Jones and M. Kandiah (eds), *The Myth of Consensus?: New Views on British History, 1945-64* (1996)).

LENT

Robert wanted to come in because he hasn't said anything yet and then I'll think we'll take a break because I don't want people to get too tired and we'll have a drink and come back and talk about demonstration.

WRAY

It's just a quick couple of points really it's just interesting sitting around the table and listening to people who obviously had a lot more involvement in the movement prior to the Trafalgar Square situation than I did, because the same sort of themes keep coming out. There's still a debate going on ten years on as to why the movement itself was so successful. Was it because it was a broad based community? Was it because you had left-wing anarcho groups who were all organising around a single issue to get unity to move forward on a broad front? So we're still having some sort of debate around the table here about the reason why it was so successful.

And that in itself to me is a lesson, because I've talked to people in the last couple of weeks who were around in the campaign and they were convinced that with the riot in Trafalgar Square, and with the situation in the prison in Strangeways,* that the revolution was coming. It was there, this was it. And that was never really my feeling, but how much of that is a generational thing, that the left had

A riot began in Strangeways Prison, Manchester, on Sunday 1 April 1990, as prisoners barricaded themselves into the chapel. It lasted 24 days.

had such a battering in the eighties, that there was a bit of a movement, there was a bit of a kickback, this is the big one, we're going to win this time. I think that there is a certain element that is generational, so maybe I'm looking at it from a different perspective because I was only 16, 17, at the time so I'm a youngster basically then.

I don't mean that as an insult at all. I didn't see all the stuff that went before it, with the CND stuff and all that, Wapping and certain issues around that issue of the miners' strike. My brother was involved going up to the miners' strike quite a lot, he was an old tanky* so that's where I get my analysis from. But it's just interesting that you're still having the same debate ten years on, as really went on ten years ago, eleven years ago, about how we're going to move forward, what is this all about, basically.

Tankies are pro-Soviet communists (originally describing those who supported the tank invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968).

BURROWS

Adam, could I just say one little thing. I want to say this, it's just that CND is the other big mass movement, two people have now said that people would be willing to join a non-payment campaign because they didn't have to do anything. Now you join CND and you don't have to do anything, you send off your subscription. Actually you're forgetting, you had pressure from your neighbours, that's a joke I know, but that was going on in Bridgewater, 'you've not bloody paid have you?' I mean pressure. You've also got the summons landing on your doormat, now that was an incredible thing for a lot of people. So I think it's not quite true that even the most inactive member of the Anti-Poll Tax Union in Bridgwater, and I'm not romanticising, people are bone idle I know that and it's been a massive frustration to me for years. But there was nobody actually who could actually get away with doing bugger all, or at least who could get away with not having a bit of pressure put on them by people who were desperate to make sure, if they weren't going to pay their bloody neighbours weren't going to pay either. I don't care about people's revolutionary purity, I don't care about their inner feelings about it, all I care about is the fact that there was enough pressure on people and involvement for the thing to work.

BURNS

And the amount of people that turned up to court is a really good indication of that, we had a phenomenal percentage of people turning up to court and that was activity and that was saying 'I'm actually going to do it and not just let it happen'.

LENT

Well shall we break for ten minutes?

Session 2: The Demonstration

LENT

The demonstration, organised by the All-Britain Federation of APTUs, took place on 31 March 1990 and involved about 200,000 people.

OK, we're going to talk now about the demonstration in Trafalgar Square,* and I think I'll bring Chas in first because he actually was arrested on the Hackney demonstration, because there obviously were some confrontational demonstrations in the weeks leading up to Trafalgar Square. So we'll start with that and then Robert will come in and then maybe Dave could say something as well also about the Trafalgar Square Defendants' Campaign.

MORRIS

I've got quite a few notes on this

LENT

Well if you can be reasonably brief, I think we'll talk for an hour, because we have only got about an hour.

MORRIS

When are we finishing?

LENT

About half four. And then Danny do you want to say something about Trafalgar Square as well and then we'll open it out to other people. I think what I'd like is, obviously the good thing about talking about Trafalgar Square and that demonstration is it's a very specific event, and really limited to a few hours of a particular day. And so people's specific experiences of the day would be really welcome, so if anyone's got any interesting stories, anything that came directly out of it, that would be great. I think the two questions that I'd like to focus on, I don't want to pre-determine the debate too much, but firstly, one thing I think it is important to get on the record is why was there confrontation, why was there violence in Trafalgar Square? Because obviously in the immediate aftermath the mainstream politicians and the police wanted to claim that it was a violent anarchistic minority that caused the trouble. Since then of course, and at the time, there has been more evidence to show that it was initiated by the police. But it would be interesting to get people's perspectives on what actually were the sequence of events in their experience. And the second thing is, how important was the demonstration as part of the campaign, was it really a turning point? Did it really ram home the issue and basically spell the end for the poll tax as a policy of the government? And so I think that would be an interesting thing to discuss. We'll start with Chas, his experiences at Hackney.

LOFT

The Hackney demonstration against the poll tax took place outside Hackney Town Hall on 7 March 1990. Police attempted to stop demonstrators entering the council meeting and there was a general riot. 56 people were arrested.

Well I'm going to keep the Hackney bit brief, because I'd like to talk about Trafalgar Square. But the thing that always made me laugh about the Hackney demonstration* was the way that the press reports blamed it on, or blamed the subsequent riot, on outside agitators. It always made me wonder where they thought the outside agitators came from. But I was arrested on the demonstration having fallen over and just got grabbed by a couple of coppers and dragged off to a van and then they threw a load of other people in the van. And when I got to see the charges against me I was supposed to have run at a line of police and tried to punch them and missed and somehow didn't get arrested in that and then ran away, ran back, and kicked a copper in the head. And one of the points in my favour was that I was wearing steel toe-cap paratrooper boots and they were unable to produce a police officer with a fractured skull! But they tried to make it a condition of my bail, I mean I didn't do any of this, I should put that on record, all that happened was I fell over …

MORRIS

Did you viciously fall over?

LOFT

It was fairly vicious I must admit. And I got quite a shock next day when I saw my picture on the front page of *The Guardian* in what appeared to be a fairly aggressive pose, and thought, oh dear. So they tried to make it a condition of my bail that I didn't go to Trafalgar Square, and my solicitor did get that condition removed.

So I went down with Stamford Hill Anti-Poll Tax Union and I think we took two double-decker buses down. And I remember we were in this park in Kennington and I was thinking, there's a lot of people here but I thought it would be really massive, and then I realised that we were in an overspill park. I think the tone for the day was set as we were coming out of this park there was this bottle neck to get out the gate and someone just ripped down the wire fence and we all just went down like that. There was nothing sort of overtly provocative in that it was just 'We've got to go through here, stop telling us, stop trying to lead us through the gate'. And it all seemed, I don't think that, well certainly no-one I knew was particularly surprised that there was trouble at Trafalgar Square. There'd been weeks and weeks of these demonstrations. I seem to remember there was one in Swindon, and if there's riots in Swindon then something's happening isn't it?

I did get what I thought was quite a good view of the outbreak of it, because as we got up to where the gates at Downing Street are there was a big wait because the SWP had sat down outside Downing Street. And when we got to Downing Street they were trying to divert the march around it and we congregated in this area behind, or around where the SWP were. And there were people, and I know this time there was no trouble, but there were people throwing the odd bottle or stuff like that because there was a line of

On 24 July 1994 during a large march against the Criminal Justice Bill a few demonstrators unsuccessfully attempted to pull down or climb over the gates to Downing Street.

police in front of the gates. And the whole way that this thing started is an interesting contrast with the Criminal Justice march a few years later where again those gates were the focus.* And the police just stood behind them and had some horses across the road which meant that it didn't ever really kick off into anything bigger. Well that was one factor anyway.

But at this time the police were exposed to people and I was trying to stay away from this but wanted to watch it, because obviously I was on bail. And I remember there was by now quite a crowd around, but there wasn't a lot being thrown at the police. And I just remember the surprise I saw when I saw the police forces come out. Because there were actually people sitting down, that's a demonstration, there are all sorts of people who you would never think would do anything, just having a picnic on the grass, and all these little chain link fences. And suddenly I saw these people running towards where these picnickers were pursued by police horses and I just thought someone's going to get killed here, and made my way up Whitehall and sat on a wall. And by this time things had kicked off outside Downing Street, you could see lots of things being thrown and so on. And I remember there was just this huge pile of scaffolding poles just lying there and I was thinking 'Whose idea was that!' And I'm pretty certain it wasn't Class War who brought them down.

And so eventually we made our way out of Whitehall and down to the Embankment and then back up I think it's Northumberland Avenue into the Square. And of course the top of Whitehall I think had been closed off by the police, and I just remember that corner at Northumberland Avenue there was just a real crush with a police van in the middle of it. And I think people started climbing on the scaffolding just to get out of that crush, but of course after a while carried on. And then I was determined to hang around in the Square, while staying well away from any trouble because of being on bail, and I remember being by the fountains when things were going on outside the South African Embassy. And there just seemed to be a mood, the people I was surrounded by were, it's a horrible term, but they were ordinary people, they weren't people who were there looking for trouble or even people who were prepared to defend themselves so much. It was just the thing was 'the police are trying to get us out of the Square, we're not going to go, we're not going to have it'. And there was a real strong mood of that, that people, I felt anyway, although they would go if it was a question of fighting or going, they were going to stay there as long as they could without getting into any trouble, even you know the most peace-loving people.

The other image that sticks in my mind is right as the police cleared almost all the Square except across the front of the National Gallery and up towards Piccadilly, was these two policemen bringing along this guy in handcuffs along the front of the National Gallery. I think the National Gallery was used as a holding area for prisoners but they were trying to get him over this gate to other coppers.

And they just lifted him up by his collar and couldn't get him any further and this guy was just hanging there going purple. And I just remember this great panorama of some people starting to throw things at the police and then there were other people in the crowd trying to stop them because this guy was going to get hit. Then suddenly there was this wave of fear and we realised that the police horses were coming. There was a guy next to me standing up a lamp post going 'they're charging us'. I think it's the only time in my life where I really thought I was going to die, just running away from the police horses I was, complete panic.

Then we made our way up into Piccadilly, and me and my girlfriend were there pretty much on our own. And then we were walking up Regent Street I think, and we saw some crusty types behind us, and they were just walking along and suddenly these police emerged behind them and charged at them. And we all just ran for our lives up Regent Street, and this guy in front of me picked up a bin and tried to put it through a window, I think it bounced off. And me and my girlfriend managed to get down a side street, and when we emerged we walked back up Regents Street and every window had been smashed, the whole place.

Obviously I don't have an overview of it, but it did seem to me that that particular aspect, of all the windows being smashed and cars getting done over, was pretty much a result of the fact that people were, like we were actually on our way home but then suddenly we got chased by the police. And as far as the 'Why did it happen?' It seemed to me that there were people there who, I don't think there was ever any conspiracy, but there were people there who were prepared for a fight with the police. And there were people there who were quite happy to have a fight with the police and wanted to have a fight with police, but you're talking about a tiny number of people. I mean even from the people who went from Hackney, a tiny number of people, and I dare say Hackney's quite unrepresentative. And what really kicked it off was the way that police reacted to that initial problem, because if they could have just left what was going on outside Downing Street, it would have petered out once the bottleneck was passed, and from then on they just totally mishandled the situation. And from their point of view, why they allowed this march to go through, at that time, with all these scaffolding poles around them and so on. They were, well, it's not my job to advise them on that.

But the other thing that really struck me in the press coverage of it is the idea that there can be some kind of common purpose in a crowd. And when you're in a crowd you just don't have the slightest idea what's going on at the front of that crowd. And there is no common purpose, people don't go there with a common purpose other than to demonstrate against the poll tax. And people don't have a common appreciation of what's happening, and that affects their reactions.

The only other thing I remember is, there was a lot of fuss made about this guy who put a scaffolding pole through a police car. I

remember a police van driving through the crowd, when I was in Trafalgar Square, and people, I mean if I'd been in a position to put a scaffolding pole through its window I would have done. And I don't think there would have been anything unreasonable in that. I don't know how the vehicles got into the crowd or what the intention was but I'm surprised there weren't more people injured by them.

LENT What happened to the charge at Hackney?

LOFT I was acquitted.

LENT Right.

LOFT Yes, unanimous decision after half an hour. The one thing, it's off the point but my barrister, I turned up on the second day of his speech. And I came in and I had these four sheets of paper I had written in a panic because the day after the first day someone had been sent down for two years for kicking a policeman at Trafalgar Square. I gave my barrister these four sheets of points to make in court and I got off. We went to the pub to celebrate and he said to me 'Oh it's a good job you gave me those sheets of points because I hadn't written my speech when I got to court this morning.'

LENT Thanks very much. Robert.

WRAY Following on slightly really, because where the trouble started from my point of view was that I was outside the South African Embassy and in that section of the crowd most people were unaware of what was going on in Whitehall. So the first inkling of any trouble was when, I think it was two police vans comes down from by Charing Cross train station into the main section of the crowd. And from any logical point of view if you drive two police vans into the middle of a crowd very fast, where there's nowhere to move to, you're going to create a problem. And basically the sequence of events were the van drove into the crowd, the van stopped, then there was various riot police milling about, attacking the crowd for want of a better word. And how I became involved was a policeman come up and tried to hit me, hit me in the face with a shield and then caught me with a glancing blow on the top of my head. And basically I reacted to that and I went and sat down for five or ten minutes, because even though he'd only caught it a glancing blow it did hurt quite a bit. And then I lost my rag basically, and then I suppose really it comes down to where does self defence start and where does it end? Because if you're defending yourself or

you're defending the crowd it's very hard to know, if I'm hitting this copper and he's doing this, that's self defence, but if I'm doing that with this copper it's not self defence. So you get into quite an academic debate.

When you've got a massive crowd and there is all this carnage going on, because after the vans come in the horses come in, and yet again all you saw was the horses coming through the crowd. And there did not seem to be any real logic in what the police were doing other than provoking, because subsequently they pushed us all past the South African Embassy up into St Martins Lane, which is where quite a lot of the damage was done to the property. But even then it was quite surreal, because you'd be having a fight with a policeman with no tools of any description, which by itself proved to me anyway that there was no conspiracy, because I wasn't wearing a hat, I wasn't wearing a mask, I didn't have an iron bar, I didn't have anything. Just trying to fight a policeman and you're using a placard. You hit him with it, it just snaps in half, he hits you with a truncheon and it hurts.

MORRIS You snap in half.

WRAY Exactly, you snap in half. So then by the South African Embassy you were having ferocious battles with riot police and 15 yards behind you there was a line of policeman with no protection on at all. And this went on for about 20 minutes, 25 minutes and then as one the crowd realised that there was police 10, 15 yards away just standing there trying to be invisible while their friends and their colleagues were having a fight. So then obviously it makes a lot more sense to have a fight with a policeman who is on the same level as you, he's not wearing anything and he's not carrying anything. And then I suppose some of the debate about the more criminal damage side of the events is what were people doing turning over cars and what were people doing creating barricades out in St Martin's Lane? But in reality if you have horses charging into the crowd and charging after the crowd you have to find a way of stopping them. So if there's a car there, you turn over the car and the police horse can't jump over the car, it's not the Grand National.

So from my point of view there was no real dynamic in the riot other than the police attacked it, people reacted, and from there everything went out of control really. And in my own experience it was all very odd because after, I went home about half-past six and I was meant to be going out raving that Saturday night. And I went back up to Piccadilly Circus to meet my girlfriend about half-past nine, I was going out in Soho. And I got up to Piccadilly Circus about half nine after I'd gone home and had a bath, and the crowd was still going about, people were still rolling about. And this was quite strange, standing outside Tower Records and seeing everyone milling about and the window go through and then some of them

ran here and then the police would be running that way and they'd be running that way and it was all very much like Keystone Cops. And I went out and then it was only the following Tuesday, the following Wednesday, I'm getting more and more into the media coverage of the whole incident, in the sense that all of a sudden people's pictures started appearing in the paper. And then all of the stories were coming out, the next day you had all the stuff, Roy Hattersley* saying 'this was organised and it was all a big conspiracy, and I hope they all get a long term in prison.'

Roy Hattersley (Lord Hattersley), Labour politician. Deputy leader of the Labour party, 1983-92.

And it was quite odd because even people who knew you would see your picture in the paper and all of a sudden I'm going from being a 17-year-old to being one of ten people in the paper who the police said were the most wanted. Which in itself is ridiculous because I'm sure there were 5,000 or 10,000 much more important criminals in a truer sense of the word knocking about in circulation that they had to catch. So it was odd because people that know you would look in the paper, and they would see you attacking the vehicle, or they would see you attacking a policeman, and how they know you as a person and the media portrayal of you, are two completely different images and ideals. So I think it opened up a lot of people's eyes to how the media deal with stories and how the media manipulate stories. And then they stepped the pressure up and launched an operation called Operation Carnaby. I went on the run for about six weeks. Then I had the first inkling that Operation Carnaby had been launched seriously because they had coverage in all the papers. And I decided that I would go and hand myself in, go and see a barrister, hand myself in, get a doctor to give me a once-over to make sure that I was well and fit and didn't have a mark on me. And then I went to see the police and they I was given bail and then I went on the run again for about four months. And then I came back from living in Scotland and Ireland, I came back to face the music as it were.

And consequently the following April I went to court and even the whole judicial process was a farce, in the sense that I was charged with two violent disorders, affrays, possession of an iron bar with intent, and I was in Southwark Crown Court. And that in itself was strange because whenever we got to court the CPS* basically turned round and said 'Well we've got 97 photographs of you doing various things. And some of them it looks like you might be doing something with a piece of paper and car and you might be doing some arson. So basically you ought to take what's coming to you.' Because the idea at first was that we'd go for self defence, but where they had so much evidence, and where they threatened to up the ante quite substantially, then it comes down to a personal choice between really going for self defence, hoping that you're going to win or go for what they're offering you at the time, some sort of deal. So consequently I ended up getting 21 months and that was my first offence.

Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), responsible for deciding what criminal cases are taken to court and organising the prosecution of these.

So that really is my little story and old Dave Morris over there and the Trafalgar Square Defence Campaign done a sterling job in sup-

porting the prisoners. Because it was strange, this really goes back to what we were talking about before, that there was such a movement against the poll tax and it was a big single-issue thing. Afterwards you had people like Militant and the SWP and mainstream left-wing organisations criticising the marchers. And it really opened a lot of people's eyes there, because you don't create a movement and when they do exactly what you've been working to do for 30 years, turn round and say 'you're all mad, it's all a big conspiracy, it's all been hijacked by lefties.' It's like, well hold on a minute, you've created this mass movement, the police attacked the crowd, the crowd react, it wasn't ever going to be a revolution it was a big spontaneous thing. It was never going to be anything other than that but you still have an incident and you don't, when the shit hits the fan, you don't go well it's nothing to do with us, it's crazy. So that's really it I suppose, in a nutshell.

LENT Thank you very much. What a shame Steve Nally's not here, because I'd have liked to have known his perspective on that. Danny?

BURNS Yes, a few things. Not too much, I'm not going to give a whole account of my time on Trafalgar Square, it will just be reflections. One of them was standing up on where the big black lions are and being able to look over it. Because I mean in a way that was quite an unusual position to see the panorama of what was going on. And there's a few things that struck me about that. One was seeing those police cars move through the crowd, you could actually see the speed and you could get a sense of these things just cutting right through people regardless of who those people were. And when you match my vision, looking above, with the accounts of people on the ground, and the people that were in the way, then it becomes totally legitimate whatever happened. And I would say quite clearly the same as you said. If I had been there I would have picked up that iron bar and I would have done anything I could to stop that vehicle. And I think that anybody would have done, anybody that had any sort of sanity about them.

The second thing I wanted to say was just something about the nature of the crowd and how the crowd changes. Because I think in a sense the key thing about that demonstration was that it made people aware just how angry people were. So it wasn't just 'we're not paying the poll tax' and so on and so forth which at the end of the day was fundamental thing about the tax. But it was that people became aware of the level of anger, and I think what was interesting was the transformation of people. Because actually it started out as a carnival, it really was, there were bright colours everywhere, people were playing music and it was a fantastic time and …

MORRIS Loads of kids

BURNS … loads of kids, and in a sense it started out as 'we've just built this movement and here it is!' And in a way it didn't need to be more than that, genuinely it was that we were really pleased to be with this mass of people that were fighting together. And gradually it changed, and as incidents occurred more and more people got dragged in and I actually think, and I don't know that I can verify this as the whole story because I just saw it from the crowd, but I think most people got involved in a sense because they were helping each other out. It was like if you see some copper hitting somebody you know, then you go in and try and pull the person away or you try and sort out the copper or whatever it is. It's not that you see some copper and then you think 'Oh I'm going to go and hit them'. And then more people get dragged in and then people are supporting them and so on and so forth. And you get a dynamic which is built up not out of aggression but actually out of offence, not necessarily 'I've been hit by this policeman', but that 'the people around me are being attacked by these people and I just can't stand there and do nothing.' And I think that's basically what happened.

But I have to say that putting it in the historical perspective that you were talking about earlier, and thinking about the archives and so on that you were referring to, and the 30-year rule and so on and so forth. We'll never know until that point, but perhaps it was precisely the intention of the police to create a violent situation. What better than to be able to label this movement as a bunch of violent extremists. And that's precisely what was attempted in the press in the days that followed the riot. You know, these are a bunch of violent lunatics and so on and so forth.

MORRIS What do you expect when you have a movement when people aren't paying their taxes?

BURNS And this isn't really a mass movement this is just a bunch of extremists trying to create this, that and the other. So the circumstantial evidence seems to suggest that it was quite deliberate. I really don't know, it was either cock-up by the police or it was quite deliberate. But I think in terms of the movement, in a sense, Militant played directly into their hands. Because what they were saying was, 'you are absolutely right, we've just built a violent movement… ' What they should have been saying was what we all know, 'This was provoked by police. This is a symbol of what's happened. This is a mass movement that you're dealing with, and this is only one aspect of a mass movement, but it was a legitimate aspect because people were provoked and people were angry, and you have to deal with this situation.' And ultimately you have to support the people that are in the movement with you and they didn't. And I think people were very very angry about that. It's difficult to say what the impact on Militant was in the long term, but I think that

was the key point at which probably people stopped saying 'right we're going to work with Militant.
But in terms of the legacy of the riot itself, we did notice a massive upturn in membership in the Anti-Poll Tax Unions, we did notice in Bristol a whole raft of the United Poll Tax Union setting up directly after the riot. And I think that's very much about the profile that it created nationally, and again about people realising how many people were involved. People realising how angry other people were. In the end I still think it that we have to say that these things were irrelevant, because without the non-payment campaign there was nothing. The tax was ended because they couldn't get people to pay it. And it was strengthened, what the demonstration did was strengthen the Anti-Poll Tax Unions and strengthen the non-payment campaign. And it was that in the end which brought the poll tax down.

Unidentified Can I make a very general point, the idea of the police being the ones who started it and it being suspected that this was all part of a bigger plan. This idea of using people to create a climate of fear, I think as an idea it backfired, I mean as is said people actually increased their involvement in the campaign. But I would say probably one of their tactics was, show that if you get involved in this campaign you'll get bashed and hope that people will then toe the line.

PROSSER I was in the south-east of the square, and when the crowd swirled a lot of people were trapped in the lip of the water-filled basin. Both the women I was with lost it, and the only way I could see to get them out of the situation was to walk directly towards the police lines. At that point there was quite a large gap between the demonstrators and the police. So I was actually in the police lines just before they charged, before they made their first quick movement, which never I think connected. And all I can tell you is they were terrified, they were just terrified. And they didn't know what they were doing, there was no command structure. There was the habit of the formation, but they were just wetting themselves. And as I moved back, as we were filtered back through line after line of police, it didn't lessen at all. There was adrenaline, but I would take an enormous amount of convincing that those people had been briefed about what they were going to do, that there was any coherent plan in the way they were going to be deployed, I just don't believe that for a moment.

BURNS I doubt that the whole of the police contingents were in that situation. But it only takes one small group of police officers to spark an incident and the whole thing can go. I can't say that's what happened, I just don't know.

LENT Well, let's just bring Dave into it

MORRIS Well, first of all I want to say that this book is just brilliant [laughter]. *The Poll Tax Rebellion* by Danny Burns, it's all in there, it's amazing. And I mean I'm not going to say much about myself, I want to give a bit of an overview of the importance of Trafalgar Square. But I did approach it personally as a kind of activist, I felt kind of responsible for what happened to everybody, I wanted to give out millions of leaflets about the national network that we were setting up of autonomous poll tax groups, and all this kind of stuff, talked to thousands of people. So I wasn't really in any group I was just floating around, which I always enjoy doing anyway.

I think that before I talk about it, that what actually happened, that the most significant thing about the demonstration is that it happened at all. And that's because of the build-up, which has been mentioned already. You don't get a quarter of a million people out on the street, because it's the right moment, or because you do lots of good leaflets, you do it because it's part of a mass movement that builds up over a long period of time. And that this particular movement was very strong on grassroots unity, I think that was very important. I don't like the word unity normally, it means obey the left generally, but in this case there was a very strong thing with unity. That anyone who was a non-payer was equal to any other non-payer, because they were the basis of the movement. That it was a radical campaign, it was talking about not co-operating with the state and the courts, it was a mass movement and it had the character of being autonomous local organisations. And all that kind of stuff came to that demonstration, and that's why the character of the demonstration was very much ordinary, so-called ordinary people, coming together with their mates and their neighbours and they'd got there under their own steam.

In particular on the eve of the demonstration of course, virtually every town hall in the country had seen some kind of demonstration and there were occupations that had big punch-ups with the police and so on and so forth. And so feelings were running high and people clearly didn't come for a ruck with the police, but they came very strong, feeling very strongly about the poll tax and being angry and being very confident.

On the actual event itself, the sheer numbers were phenomenal you know and I think nobody really expected 250,000 people or whatever and 50,000 in Glasgow as well on the same day. It was very relaxed and exuberant. There's no point going into details about, it ended up in sort of a mass battle all over Trafalgar Square and the West End. And I think I want to say that I don't think it was out of control. I think there were two forces competing for control. There was the police who were trying to get control and break up the demonstration and get control of the streets. And people were defending their right to be there on the street, to demonstrate. It was clear to the people on that demonstration that they were

defending themselves and their right to be there and to support each other. But they didn't see the police had the right to be there and to force them away. So there were two competing forces, which is why it was such a strong confrontation. And people got confidence that they could actually defend the space they were in, if they were pushed out of one area they spread out to another area and took control. And the whole stuff about the West End wasn't just, 'Oh fuck it we've lost at Trafalgar Square so let's just do anything we feel like'. It was about 'Wow, look at us on the streets here, just 200 yards from Trafalgar Square, we're in control of the streets here'. And then there's thousands of people wondering around the West End saying, 'We're in control of the streets', there's no police because they're all there trying to get control of Trafalgar Square. And so it was actually a very empowering event in that way. And of course then it extends to smashing shop windows and looting, not for the sake of it, but because why are those things in the shops and not available to people that need them, you know. I'll go on about that another time.

Anyway, I'd say that, yes it's true that after the event the media went hysterical and the police and the authorities and the Labour party and the whole lot of them, that it was either deliberate or it was opportunist. That they either deliberately, the police and the government, set out to break up the demonstration, provoke a battle, and then characterise the whole movement as violent and completely off the scale, therefore people should start paying their tax because look what you're getting into if you follow these kind of people. Which would have the result of splitting the movement into radicals and the kind of foot soldiers who are just going along with whatever the leadership are saying. And Militant fell straight into that because they were trying to be respectable and stay in the Labour party. Or, it was opportunism that it went out of control with the police and then the media thought 'fuck, we've got to play our role here, the politicians have got to play their role, the police chiefs have got to play their role' even though it hadn't quite worked out as they'd planned. Maybe they'd hoped it would have gone off all peaceful, but I think it was deliberate. But what they completely miscalculated definitely, was the amount of public support, not just against the poll tax, but for a movement that was at that stage very rooted in every community in the country.

For example from Haringey, there were three or four hundred people who had gone down together and almost like everybody knew someone or knew someone that knew someone that was at Trafalgar Square. So a lot of it was, I think, word of mouth, it wasn't relying on the media to find out what had happened. All the anti-poll tax people no doubt also gave good leaflets, we certainly did at Haringey, so that the media didn't have a monopoly on reporting what had happened. People were finding it out from all kinds of means. So there was a survey done by the media about 24 hours later, I don't know if it is in [Danny Burns'] book or not, but a phenomenal percentage supported people defending themselves

against the police despite all the hostility in the media about that.
I'll just say that, well, this doesn't really fit into my whole talk here, but Michael Conway was the last person, second to last prisoner defendant to be on trial. There was 500 people arrested and his was the last case, second to last case, I think it was. He was an ex-miner and like you [Robert Wray] they had loads of photographs of him chucking stuff at police in about 20 different locations. And he argued self-defence and the jury acquitted him. And it was ruled that he had the right to self-defend the whole demonstration, not just himself, which is phenomenal and got hardly any publicity. But that's quite a staggering verdict and it's a good vindication of the Trafalgar Square Defendants' Campaign strategy, and the poll tax movement really, the public support they had.
Can I just briefly say, because we are mainly talking about Trafalgar Square, that as a result what happened, we were as wrong-footed as anyone else in Haringey, 'This has gone completely out of our control, we don't know what the fuck to do', people getting arrested all over the shop. Militant of course who were trying to get control of the the anti-poll tax movement slagged the people that resisted the police. So a few independent groups got together to talk about setting up a defendants' campaign. And it mushroomed very quickly. There were also defence campaigns in local areas for people who had been arrested outside town halls, like Hackney and Haringey, we'd got people arrested outside our town hall, which set up a defendant's campaign run by the defendants before Trafalgar Square. So that encouraged us to do that on a national scale.
So as a result the Trafalgar Square Campaign was set up, which we decided early on should be run by the defendants. They should have veto and, it was run not just by defendants but it was seen as their campaign. And I won't go on about, it's all in the book, but the most important thing was, our aim was to prevent the isolation of those defendants and the split in the movement that it seemed like the media and the government, and everybody wanted, including Militant. I think Militant regretted actually the position that they took because afterwards they realised that the movement was too strong and the defence campaign was too effective. And I think as a result of that, the Trafalgar Square Defendants' Campaign helped to keep the movement united and to keep it radical, rather than split into this kind of radical and political factions. And despite the opposition of Militant, who were actually in control of the so-called Federation, the National Federation, virtually every group in the country affiliated to the Trafalgar Square Defendants' Campaign, sometimes after big internal arguments.
And that's what I worked on, that was my role, trying to work within the movement to get the backing and support of the movement, rather than the practical side which other people in the campaign were working, supporting the families and so on. Now, it had more ramifications apart from keeping the movement united. I think that there were calls, I can't remember exactly who by, I think it was politicians mainly, for bans on demonstrations in central

London, and bans on further anti-poll tax demonstrations. So this was definitely laying down the gauntlet, for 'What are you going to do about it, we're calling for banning of demonstrations', and our response was, 'We've got to get back there as soon as possible, get back to Trafalgar Square on principle'. Because I think that Trafalgar Square was a symbolic event. As well as an event that happened in reality it became symbolic. And as a result of the Trafalgar Square Defendants' Campaign, there was another demonstration in London six months later, which was also attacked by the police.

LENT Can I just bring some other people in?

[tape change]

MORRIS ... and there was a demonstration of course a year later, we booked Trafalgar Square, we didn't use it in the end, which turned out to be a victory demonstration for the poll tax had been abolished a few days before. And I think this should be noted, that everything focused on Trafalgar Square, that there was going to be another repeat of Trafalgar Square and we thought it might be banned, we were calling for everybody just to come into central London, anywhere in central London. They banned that anniversary demonstration, and it was going to be probably ten times more serious than what happened in Trafalgar Square, if they'd tried to stop that demonstration going ahead. And the tension was so great that I think that contributed to the fact that they announced the end of the tax a few days before that demonstration. So I think that demonstrations certainly have an important role, even though it's often a symbolic role, but symbolism's important to the movement, something we could organise round.

LENT Chas wanted to say something

LOFT Well I briefly wanted to say that TSDC was one of the most positive things to come out of the whole thing. There's a whole lot of people, of whom I was one, got experience of legal monitoring on demonstrations as a result of doing that for TSDC. And that then fed out into road protests and so on, where people were a bit more aware of the dangers than I think we all were before we went to the first Trafalgar Square demonstration. As far as the conspiracy theory of it starting, I wonder if I could say two things about that. The first was that, I think Danny's quite right that there's all sorts of circumstantial evidence to support the idea that it was a conspiracy. I mean, the piles of weapons waiting for us in ring one. But now that I like to think of myself as a professional historian, I find those theories difficult. And it seems to me that the answer to that

is that the only difference between the way the police dealt then, perhaps still now, with an unruly crowd and the police provoking a riot, was that they couldn't control the crowd. The people weren't just going to run away, even people like me, I was on bail, I was desperate not to get arrested for doing nothing twice in a month, but I still wasn't going to go home. And I think that was the difference, the police provoked a riot because they used what would normally be effective, in their eyes, tactics but which couldn't be.
But having said that, what happened at the TSDC demo the following October, where I was a legal monitor and saw the start of it. I cannot explain how that, it wasn't a riot it was a rout, but how it turned violent in any other terms than that at some level in the police, perhaps at a spontaneous ordinary policeman level, the decision was taken to attack that demonstration. I cannot accept any other explanation, which does tend to suggest occasionally conspiracies of one kind and another do happen.

JONES I had a question for Robert really. That is, the reason that I wasn't at the demonstration in Trafalgar Square, just to excuse myself, is because I'd just had a baby who was still an infant and because I was feeding him myself I couldn't be separated from him for that long. And I had been at Wapping on several occasions, and I'd been injured at Wapping and I knew how awful Wapping was and I had no illusions about police tactics or the ability to charge police horses into crowds of women and children. And you mentioned that you had been at Wapping, as I think you said, a 13-year-old with your father. And so it does seem to me that you can tell us really, that as a 17-year-old who'd been to Wapping with your Dad you must have known, this is likely?

WRAY I wouldn't have gone to the demonstration thinking it was likely because however the situation happened in Wapping I did see my father getting quite badly beaten by the police on the first anniversary march, the big demonstration. And I had seen quite a lot of brutality. But I don't think that necessarily meant I was aware, or I thought it was likely that there was going to be trouble. But what it did tell me was that if there is going to be trouble then it's going to happen in this way. So it wasn't so much I was aware, as that when it did happen and I saw the police driving into the crowds and I saw the horses charging it was like, well they're doing this, this is *déja vous*, all over again. But that's not to say I went there thinking of it. If I'd known, if I'd have gone there forewarned and forearmed and all the rest of it, then I doubt if I would have been caught to be honest. So it was a feeling of *déja vous* for sure. It was only three or four years between those two incidents. It was just like history repeating itself, first as tragedy and then farce and all that.

MURGATROYD

I wanted to try and put a different perspective on it actually, because we, just like all the other local anti-poll tax groups in London, the Ealing contingent went down. Actually we had to go down in three different contingents. One of the biggest, we took over two or three carriages of the Central line,* I don't know how many people. It was like rush hour and everyone was all packed together. And we got down there anyway and we were near the front of the march, went through the march, and most people just went to the pub and went home. And we didn't know there'd been a riot until we got home and put the TV on. And that's important in a way because I think it's important not to lose sight of what that demonstration was. Because a lot of the reaction, from activists and supporters of the Ealing anti-poll tax federation, initially it was quite confused. It wasn't actually immediately we blamed the police, and that's important. I think Nally and Sheridan were wrong because they were supposed to be leaders of this movement and they should have had enough sense not to make the comments they did before the facts came out and what have you. But nevertheless, they were actually speaking for some people who were in the anti-poll tax movement, immediately we actually got quite angry that this incredible demonstration had somehow ended up in a riot. And they were scared that it was going to discredit the campaign, because the truth is most demonstrations are peaceful. And just to illustrate that, there was just two things stick out in my mind about how ordinary the demonstration was, how ordinary people. There were two women from Liverpool and they were there in their going out gear, short skirts, you know, high heels and they'd been out on the Friday night clubbing in Liverpool. And they'd just got on a coach to come down to the demo because they just felt they had to do something about the issue, and I just thought yes, ordinary people.

on the London Underground

But also beside people's power, I can remember, if you can cast your mind back to 1989, the Romanian revolution. And do you remember the Romanian tricolour under Ceausescu* it had a sort of Stalinist symbol in the middle* and the demonstrators would mainly cut that symbol out, so it was just this tricolour with this hole in it. And I can remember on the demonstrations seeing a Union Jack with a hole cut out of the middle of it. It was like this idea of people's power, you know, and there was a sense that because it got violent in a way that had been spoilt. But as events turned out within a few, I'd say within two days, everyone realised that the police had lost it and that they were to blame for the violence. And that was absolutely, and I can't remember anyone approaching us on the street and attacking the anti-poll tax movement because of it and you know I mean we were...

Nicolae Ceausescu (1918-89), Communist dictator of Romania.

Coat of arms, with a scene of oil derrick, forests and mountains, surrounded by sheaves of wheat, surmounted by a red star.

MORRIS

People were terrified about what the reaction of the public would be. Can I just say something I've just thought of? We spoke to someone from a news crew, ITV I think it was, the same night they

actually had someone who was kind of semi-condemning the demonstrators on the evening news. And apparently someone from the crew told us, they told somebody, it was probably a rumour, that they had to interview 17 people, before they could find one that would say something that would slightly condemn what the demonstrators had, you know, hadn't done. So it shows how the media was desperate to try and attack what had happened, but the public weren't really buying it.

LENT

Whether it's a conspiracy or not, if it was a conspiracy it was an appalling miscalculation. Because the sense I had afterwards was that this was Thatcher who was already being discredited. And who'd made such a virtue of being this semi-fascistic type leader and had such strong control, who just seemed to completely lose control of the country, because so many people weren't paying their taxes, but then lose control of the streets. This was a complete breakdown of civil order and I thought well this is just going to add to the discredit and I think it probably did in that way. Can I bring in Glen, and then you Danny?

BURROWS

Yes, I just want to make a small point, I don't agree that most demonstrations, certainly not in my experience, are not physical. I mean certainly during the Thatcher years. It seemed to me absolutely the reverse, that almost every major demonstration I've ever been on has involved some kind of violent incident. What we make of that is open to discussion. Perhaps in the seventies, but certainly, no not even then, every major demonstration that I've been involved in, including CND demonstrations which have probably been the most peaceful. I mean I can't ever remember myself being on a demonstration with no violence. I think we need to discuss that violence within the context of labour's struggles, and struggles in this country in the last sort of two or three decades. Because we've certainly got a lot to learn anyway and by the June the 18th demonstration* what we were getting then, no longer the sort of crusty anarchists, we'd got men in suits co-ordinating it. I mean how ludicrous was it that this came out of that. It all needs looking at closely.

See note above, p.40.

BURNS

I suppose my thoughts are on the same lines, which I think is that there is a very fine line between a demonstration that's attacked and a demonstration that's not attacked. And I agree that if you look at all of the major incidents, this comes back to all the conspiracy theories, if you look at the miner's strike and if you look at Wapping, look at all of these historical events, they've involved some element of provocation to one degree or another.

And I was just thinking just now, though I've not really made the connection before, that in some ways the closest link that I can find between the demonstration and things that have happened in the

past, is the way that the police responded to the Notting Hill carnival.* Because I was brought up around Portobello market and I remember as a young child being under the flyover at West Way and riot police on one side and the crowds of all sorts of people on the other side and bricks over my head. And, the image that's in my head, I can't remember what the name of the school is, but there's a school, it's at the bottom end of Portobello market,* and you looked through it and caught glimpses of hundreds of police horses just sat there waiting in the back of the school to do what ever they needed to do. And in a sense it only took a couple of small incidents with one interaction with one other person a violent incident happens and that whole weight is there, is sat there just waiting to happen.

In a way this was no different, the resources were there just waiting for an incident to spark it. And the issue then becomes how did they react to that incident, in a way it doesn't matter whether they provoked the incident or somebody else provoked the incident but what is the institutional response to that spark. And it can either be something which creates a riot, or it can be something that just lets it happen.

The Notting Hill carnival takes place on August Bank Holiday weekend every year. There were serious riots in Notting Hill in August 1958, started when a white woman was attacked by white people for being married to a black man. The carnival started unofficially the following year as a reply to the riots and from 1965 was an official event on the streets of Notting Hill. There were serious riots in 1976, and in many other years complaints about racist policing and violence.

Probably Colville Primary School, Lonsdale Road, London W11.

BURROWS

It's also that kind of fear thing as well, you know if you're going down the street and you see lots of police and horses then that makes you start to think and behave very differently than you would do if they weren't there. So I think their very presence is going to spark trouble in some shape or form because fear starts and then it's only a matter of time.

MORRIS

I think the fear is actually only half of it, there is also the confidence you get from the fact that people are standing their ground, angry about what's happening. In fact it struck me that the fear is what they are trying to generate, the police, but the solidarity of the crowd and determination of the crowd is a counter balance. That's why people stay, because sometimes if you're just afraid you then do nothing, run away or whatever. But actually the thing about Trafalgar Square, is people fought back very ferociously and held their ground, and extended their ground to other parts of the West End.

LENT

Talking of fear, fear was a big part of that demonstration, it often was at demonstrations in the late eighties. Although there was a lot of fear towards the police I remember my initial fear at the beginning was actually from other demonstrators because I remember that people started throwing bits of scaffolding and there were joints from scaffolding and scaffolding bolts and they were going over my head. I remember thinking, it only takes one not very good throw for these to start falling on people in front. There was certainly no conspiracy on the part of the demonstrators put it that way, anyone who claimed that at the time, because it was com-

pletely chaotic and there were people doing things that maybe weren't so bright, well I certainly thought so at the time.

LOFT

Anti-poll tax demonsration, Brixton, London, 20 October 1990. Some demonstrators marched to Brixton prison, where people arrested at the Trafalgar Square demonstration were being held, and a riot then developed.

Just on that note I was caught behind the police lines at the Brixton one in October* when people were throwing bottles at the police. Crouching down, bottles exploding all round you.

BURNS

I actually felt more fear personally at the Brixton demo than at the Trafalgar Square demo. And I am sure that's a lot about being caught in small side streets with riot police charging down and so on. You don't know what on earth's going to happen. If you're in a massive square and you're surrounded by hundreds of thousands of people who are with you, you just have a sense that you've got some protection.

LOFT

On 3 June 1989 a student-led demonstration for democratic change in Tiananmen Square, Beijing, China, was attacked by soldiers and tanks. Many demonstrators were killed.

The East German secret police.

What happened at Brixton was completely appalling. What I was going to say was that, it has been alluded to, I don't know what other people think, but I think there is some significance in the fact that all these things had been going on in Eastern Europe, and Tiananmen Square* and we'd seen all that. It's only today that I've remembered that at Hackney people were shouting 'Stasi, Stasi'* at the police and this was very much in people's minds. And I think all those images that we've seen in the previous year maybe gave people a bit of extra courage at the time. To think well the Romanians don't take this sort of crap why should we? I don't think it was just that, but I think that was an important context.

JORDAN

Blair Peach was a teacher, killed on 23 April 1973 when an Anti-Nazi League protest against a National Front meeting in Southall was broken up by police.

James Connolly, executed for his part in the 1916 Easter Rising in Ireland, was born in Edinburgh, where there is an annual memorial march.

I think I should comment, I'd just like to reinforce the context, but also the context of Britain because I found that I came from Australia, I hadn't known anything but peaceful demonstrations and that there was clearly a very different climate. I'd come down and gone on the Blair Peach* memorial demonstration and that was the first demonstration I'd been on in London since I'd been in Edinburgh and even that was an eye opener in terms of the level of tension and so on. People were walking along in the demonstration, obviously that was very conflicting with the police because people were blaming the police for killing someone and that's what we were trying to remember and so there was a specific point to that one.

The other comparison I would make was in Scotland, in Edinburgh when they unbanned the Connolly memorial march,* and some sectarian marches. The level of tension and violence around those was far in excess of anything that I'd experienced around poll tax. And I wasn't going on any of those, I was just wandering around

the city on my daily business, I had no idea. I asked what's this and they basically said 'don't go out tonight', or 'don't go to that part of Edinburgh it'll be rough in that part of Edinburgh' that sort of thing.

So I'm just trying to reinforce the sense of context, for me there was quite a different context of violence around popular demonstration, not just related to Europe I think the world of popular demonstration is very specific to Thatcherism to a certain degree it may be even specific to England in some way, depending on the issue that's there.

WRAY

The point I was going to make is in relation to what was said in the immediate aftermath by the Federation people, or some of them anyway. In the sense that in the first 24 hours, everyone knows really that in the immediate aftermath of an event like that the story that first gets put out is the one that goes into consciousness. So if the people like Nally turn round and say 'we're going to have an internal enquiry and whoever is responsible for this we're going to grass them up, and this is all a load of loonies'. That is it, that is the image that comes across, that is the story that comes across. So it's important that even though they might have been thinking that at the time, because the square was chaotic, it was chaos, complete chaos. And if you were in a certain part of the square, if you were in the western part of the square you probably wouldn't seen what was going on by the South African Embassy. But if you didn't see it you can't really talk about it, that's my analysis.

So that gets across, that's the story straight away and then automatically that puts the whole movement on the back foot, because you're having to defend people you're not really defending. And instead of saying 'well hold on a minute, please sit down and wait a week', then you can buy yourself a bit of time and have a proper investigation, rather than just coming out with a little sound bite to the media. So I don't know whether people can learn lessons from that now or not, I don't know whether the situation over May Day's* going to be good or bad, I'm not really too sure. But I think there is a lesson to be learned from these things, that the story does get across, OK people are angry, the people who thought it was a conspiracy at once, lefty groups were angry that their peaceful demonstration had turned into a riot, that's a given. But equally the people who were involved in defending the crowd are angry that the people at the top of the movement then turned round and condemned them. So it was, I think there was a lot of anger on both sides to be honest.

At a protest against capitalism in central London on 1 May 2000 police officers in riot gear were brought in to break up the demonstration when a McDonald's and a bureau de change were broken into and wrecked. About 30 people were arrested.

LENT

I'll take a couple more points before we finish up if anyone has something.

BURNS I think that the quote 'top of the movement' was an illusion, that actually the All-Britain Federation was irrelevant to the movement largely. It met, it was mostly Militant groups and they got on with it and talked to themselves. There were a few of us that were on that committee that were trying to engage in some sort of debate. But to be honest 90 per cent of Anti-Poll Tax Unions had nothing to do with this national structure whatsoever. It had no difference in terms of real effect. It created …

MORRIS It didn't put out any information …

BURNS No information was put out …

MORRIS It didn't encourage communication channels or anything, nothing…

BURNS They had some very strange events, like the People's March for whatever it was, which involved about 97 Militant people and three others.*

BURROWS In matching tracksuits.

BURNS In matching tracksuits. And in fact it was a complete irrelevance. And by the time of the riots it became completely irrelevant because anybody that had supported it in the first place, they decided that was the end of the story. So I think the real issue there is that actually the Trafalgar Square Defendants' Campaign in a sense became a surrogate national leadership. Not in the sense of saying this is what we should do and that's what we should do, but in the sense of providing the support and the information that a national organisation needed to do. But I think what's really important is that this movement wasn't led in a sense, it was led at a local level by hundreds of people, and there was co-ordination, and there was information through networks but not in a classical sense. It wasn't led as most political movements are led, from the top down, it was led from the bottom up. And that's what makes this movement different to a lot of other movements, because in a sense it happened, spontaneous isn't quite the right word, it didn't happen spontaneously, but it happened through

* The People's March Against the Poll Tax, with three groups of 25 people coming from different parts of the country to London. The Glasgow group set out on 9 September 1990. Of the 75 people taking part, over 70 were Militant supporters, and they were given special tracksuits to march in.

MORRIS Organically.

BURNS Organically through the coalescence of a lot of organisation at a local, at a city, rural, regional level. So it does say something about

the capacity to organise without a national leadership in that sense. But that doesn't mean to say that there shouldn't have been one, in some ways there could have been effective leadership, which supported the campaign in ways which the structures which existed didn't.

CHARLES HAWES I just have one question, at one point did you think that you were going to win? When was it over those months was that you thought the movement really was going to punch through? Were there subtle indicators beforehand? Was it a surprise when the announcement came out so suddenly?

BURNS Well for me there were two stages. There was a point at which we realised this was a mass movement, which didn't necessarily mean that we knew what the outcome was going to be of that mass movement. Suddenly in Bristol we realised that there were 30, 35 groups and some of them had 500 members and so on. And that was a point where we realised this wasn't just a small campaign, it was something much bigger than anything we'd ever experienced before but we still didn't know where we'd get. For me the riot wasn't that significant in terms of saying we're going to win this, it was the point at which we got to the courts and we realised that actually hundreds of thousands of people weren't paying and that they were going to turn up in court and the whole system was going to collapse because they actually literally couldn't get the stuff through. I don't know when it was but there was a point of realisation that we are going to win this and it's going to be here, it's going to be in the complete clogging up of the system.

LOFT I just wanted to say, almost in defence of Steve Nally, that I think part of the explanation of why he reacted the way he did in condemning the riot, was the pressure on him personally. In that it had been noted that he'd been on all these demonstrations in London that had turned into riots and the *Evening Standard** had talked about the mobile phone Militant who is at all the riots. And I think that what Danny's saying is very important in that, because had Steve Nally been a leader who had come from the movement instead of being imposed upon it I think he'd have had the confidence to stand up for the movement. But because he wasn't he felt isolated and was under a lot of pressure to talk his way out of it, which is what he basically did.

Evening Standard, London daily evening paper.

BURNS Just an aside on that, because I was standing next to him at the time he made those comments, before he made them to the press. And I saw him looking down at the crowd, I saw him witness the violence for the first time and his immediate instinctive reaction was, I can't remember the words but it was something like 'it's those fucking

anarchists again' or something like that. Those aren't the words but it was totally immediate, it was totally instinctive and it wasn't thought through but that was his response.

BURROWS That was how the Militant Tendency operated anyway. They were bound to lose, it was bureaucratic.

LENT One very quick point Dave.

MORRIS The best thought for other movements in the future is not have anybody in positions of power because not only can you not control them, they have the power and they try to control you, but secondly they have another agenda, not because they are bad people, but because they're in a different position. Suddenly they're not the same as the people on the street, they're somebody special who's got to worry about defending the organisation, defending the respectability and defending the fact that they've negotiated with the police and it's all gone horribly wrong. And that 'I might be personally responsible so I'd better condemn what's happened'. Actually in defence of Steve Nally as well it's not something personally wrong with him; it's something wrong with that kind of politics where people try to get control over other people's struggles. So for the future everyone should run their own struggles and not go looking for leaders.

LENT Thanks everyone, very much.