

BOB CANT

Clare (C) interviewing Bob (B)

Extract 1: Track 2. 0.00 – 3.59

GLF (GAY LIBERATION FRONT) and CONSCIOUSNESS RAISING GROUPS

B: OK, I came to London in 1970. I was er a kind of classic closeted gay man at the time. I didn't go to any gay bars or anything like that, but I knew that I was attracted to other men, and erm, I was a teacher and then I went back to study for a bit and while I was er, studying I became ... I heard about the Gay Liberation Front. I mean I'd read about the Gay Liberation Front in the context of the States, er, but I was very interested to hear about it's opening up in London, and in 19 ... in September 1971, I was living in Notting Hill Gate and the meetings of GLF were taking place in a church there called All Saints. Well, not actually in the church, in the church hall, which was about a quarter of a mile away from where I lived. So I went along to All Saints in September '71 and it was just amazing. I just couldn't believe it. One of these kind of moments you walked into that ... that room and there were all these people, mostly men, but a number of lesbians as well. I just ... you just ... can't quite ... I can't quite get the words right to describe the kind of atmosphere. I mean, sometimes people talk about coming home. I didn't quite feel that, I felt it was more of an adventure. I felt I was going somewhere new, somewhere exciting, somewhere that I really wanted to be.

And one of the things that I did find strange was that a lot of the men were wearing frocks, which I wasn't interested in doing, but they were wearing frocks like their mothers wear ... might have worn and that was ... I never really worked all that out. Anyway it was a very sort of exciting atmosphere. So, I then became involved in ... in GLF after that and I er, particularly joined a Consciousness Raising group and there were I think about eight gay men who were in this group, and we met once a week and we talked about what it meant to be gay, and a lot of them had been on the scene, which I hadn't been, um, and so they talked a bit about the scene. But we just talked about like what our feelings were and er, what kind of problems we had, what barriers there were. So it was good because the meetings, the GLF meetings, were very exciting but there were hundreds of people there. Whereas in the Consciousness Raising group there were, like ... as I say, only about eight of us. So, you know, we could actually talk about things in detail and you could (*coughs*) get to know a bit about the other people so it was very important for me.

I also had a Chilean boyfriend at this time, and he was involved in GLF as well. He wasn't in that, he was in a different Consciousness Group, but we were ... so we were going along together, sort of learning about, you know, learning about being gay. It was a very nice period of my life, erm, and um, I think the thing that particularly I took out of that – those months of GLF and the Consciousness Raising group – was the notion about coming out, and, I mean, I had tended to

keep my sexual thoughts to myself, hadn't really spoken about them to other people. But coming out was clearly something that was very important in GLF. The idea of sort of stopping being embarrassed, or stopping being ashamed about our sexuality and sort of, you know and saying who we were, and erm, that was, I think the key message that I took away from, you know, from GLF and it was ... one of the important things was to try and come out wherever you were, whatever kind of situation you were in.

Extract 2: Track 3. 4.53 – 10.15

GAY TEACHERS GROUP. JOHN WARBURTON CASE. SETTING UP A GAY GROUP IN ATTI UNION

But coming out with work colleagues, you know, was important, and erm, I became interested in talking to other people who were doing the same kind of work as I did. So I was interested to find out about the, the Gay Teachers Group which was set up in London, I think probably in '73 possibly, and it was mainly London teachers who went there, and er, it was just a chance to meet other teachers and to talk about the kind of problems that we had. And I was working in further education so I ... and not many people at that group were actually in FE, but people were more likely to talk about school situations, but it didn't matter, it was like ... it was still a place to explore kind of common problems that we had, and it was again, it was fairly reaffirming.

And I think things changed in that group in a way, erm ... it changed focus slightly with the case of John Warburton, and John Warburton was a teacher employed by the Inner London Education Authority, ILEA, and they were kind of a very progressive education authority and erm, they had kind of ... they had ... in response to questions, they had said that they would not discriminate against gay teachers. Anyway, John was erm, a geography teacher in a girls' school, and one day one of the pupils in his class asked him ... she said that she'd seen him on a gay rights demonstration and blah blah blah, so they had a conversation about ... the class had a conversation about that, and that was fine and it was ... it was like never mentioned again. I mean, a group of teenage girls aren't going to be terribly interested in the sexuality of a gay man in his twenties, I mean they probably thought he was an old fogey. But anyway, so ... and then one or two other classes did the same thing, and it was the same pattern, you know? A bit of curiosity, a bit of discussion and then that was it – got on with teaching geography.

But then the school discovered about it and (*coughs*) the ... he was asked to sign a statement saying that he would not discuss his sexuality again except in the context of organised sex education classes, and erm, he said he wouldn't do so, because no other teacher in the school was being asked to ... to sign such a statement. So because of the nature of his contract erm, well, he didn't actually have a permanent job so they didn't renew his contract. So they could say to the public "No we didn't sack anybody for being gay." You know? "We gave him the opportunity to sign this statement and he didn't". But anyway it became a bit of a, you know it became a big cause for the Gay Teachers Group to sort of fight over, 'cos John was prepared to

fight about this. And we also found that he had to fight in terms of his union as well, the National Union of Teachers, the NUT wasn't terribly supportive of this at first, so there was a lot of organising had to go on to actually persuade the NUT that this kind of discrimination was something that they should erm, that they should oppose.

So it was ... you know, there were lots of meetings amongst Gay Teachers Group members trying to build support in with, you know, with other Trade Unionists, lobbying counsellors, holding demonstrations, all those ... all those kind of things. So that ... we're talking about 1974, '75 and that was very important I think for the way the Gay Teachers Group developed. I mean, it then took on a very different kind of politics, I think from what it had before. I mean originally it had been very much like a support group and a bit like almost sometimes it was a bit like a Consciousness Raising group, only larger. But now it had a different kind of ... an additional political focus.

So that was when I began to think about the possibility of setting up a group in my own union, 'cos I taught in Further Education, I was in a different union, I wasn't in the NUT, I was something that was called The Association of Teachers in Technical Institutes. So er, my flatmate at the time, Greg, he and I decided to try to set up a gay group within ATTI, and we, you know, we did all the things that you do. We advertised through gay press, we publicised it through various sort of networks, and we worked also within a kind of a Left wing caucus called Rank and File, within the Union, to try to get them to support us as well. And in 1976 at the union conference there was a long resolution about discrimination and how, you know, the Union would oppose discrimination on such and such grounds. And we managed to ... you know, race, gender, disability, blah blah blah and we managed to sneak in sexual orientation into this list. I mean that doesn't seem very sort of revolutionary now but at the time it was like ... it was quite ... it was quite a bit deal.

Extract 3: Track 5. 0.00 – 8.54

GAY LEFT (INFLUENCED BY RED RAG) and WRITING ABOUT GAYS IN UNIONS

B: 1975 there was this group set up called Gay Left, and we were people erm ... we were ten gay men all based in London, and we were all white, most of were graduates, and we'd been involved in various groups since erm, the days of GLF. I mentioned Greg, who I shared a house with, he and I had been involved in the Gay Teachers Group together and then in setting up a group in our own union. There were other people like Jeffrey¹ who was involved ... who was at the LSE and he had organised various meetings there so there were a number of people who were ... had these kind of sort of loose connections so we were quite impressed by a feminist magazine called Red Rag which tried to sort of look at feminist politics and socialist politics and ... and sort of integrate them, I suppose. So we began to talk casually about doing

something in relation to ... to gay politics and so that was how we got the idea of setting up Gay Left.

Now we ... I think this is interesting in terms of the way that we worked at the time. We were all men. We didn't think about the fact that we were an all-male group. We just, you know, we knew each other quite easily. So we just set up a group and then it was only like after about issue three that some lesbians started saying "What are you doing?" Blah blah blah, and challenging us in terms of, you know, in terms of the way we were operating as a collective group. And I just ... it's just interesting I think in terms of the way that unconscious discrimination works. I mean we all had lesbian friends, we were all influenced by feminism. We had been influenced by this journal Red Rag, and yet the publication that we set up was a collective of gay men.

C: Did you do anything differently after the lesbian mentioned this to you?

B: Well, I think we made more attempt to make sure ... I mean there were always lesbians writing articles for the journal, but we didn't change the collective erm ... we ... just tried to make sure that, you know, there were more lesbian voices in the ... you know, in the journal, and you can see that in terms of the later ... the later issues. And just as a little plug I mean these journals are now all on line at www.gayleft1970s.com, or maybe it's dot.org. But it's www. Gayleft1970s.com or org. (Editor: www.gayleft1970s.org)

So this ... this journal of white men was set up, um, and ... I'll just read out the first two lines ... the first few lines, of the collective statement of Issue number 1, which came out in the autumn of 1975. "This is a Socialist journal, edited by gay men. We have a twofold aim in producing this magazine. First we hope to contribute towards a Marxist analysis of homosexual oppression. Secondly we want to encourage in the gay movement an understanding of the links between the struggle against sexual oppression and the struggle for Socialism."

So that was our ... our kind of statement of aims and over the next ten issues that's kind of loosely kind of the framework within, you know, within which we worked, and we covered all kinds of areas about sort of gay identity, self-organisation, erm, the link between gay oppression and class. We tried to be international as well and sort of had ... articles about other parts of the world: South America, New Zealand, you know, that come to mind, um, and we were trying as I say to integrate these two themes of gay liberation and Marxism. I mean it's interesting that Marxism is there in line three. That's the way that ... we didn't just say something sort of woolly about social reform in the way that we probably would nowadays. Or even Socialism. It was Marxism.

C: Where did you meet?

B: We met um, once a week at least in each other's houses. We took it in turn, and sometimes it was with a competitiveness about the kind of cakes you had in the middle of the meeting! But I mean it was quite, I mean it was quite hard work, you know. That ... it was a

regular commitment and then as well as the meetings of course you had to, you know, to do research and writing outside.

C: And how did people find the magazine? Did ... was it for sale?

B: It was for sale, yes. It cost ... the first issue cost 30 pence. A lot of it was through ... was through social networks, you know? I mean I know I sold lots just to people ... to people whom I knew. It would have been in sort of various erm, sort of alternative bookshops. I mean of which there were a lot more alternative independent bookshops at that time. And erm, and then it was publicised in the gay press and in Socialist press as well, and we took it to conferences with us and so on. So it was ... I mean it was again, it was part of our ... it was part of our task was to sell it, you know, it wasn't just given over to a distribution agency, we had to ... we actually had to do that ourselves as well. But it was, I mean, it was ... it was very new. I mean I wouldn't say it was the same as me walking into that church hall in 1971, but it was ... it was a bit of an adventure to, you know, to produce this er ... this journal. You know, people did ... I mean you would come across people who ... you wondered how they ... how they got it. I remember meeting somebody from Sunderland, and I thought, you know, how did you get your hands on this in Sunderland? And he'd clearly read all these ... all the ... all the issues. But anyway, you know, it got around.

I stayed in it for I think six issues. I began ... I was just doing other things, I suppose, and erm, that was also around the time that I was arrested, as I explained in another context. I was arrested and charged with Gross Indecency and although I was acquitted, when I ... when that case was over, I wanted to ... to do something different so I ... I became involved with Lesbian ... at that time it was called London Gay Switchboard. So I gave up my involvement in Gay Left and I became involved as a volunteer on ... on London Gay Switchboard.

C: Could you tell me a little about that?

B: I will, but there's something I just want to say about Gay Left. In the first issue of Gay Left I wrote an article called ... I think it's called Gays in Trade Unions. *(Bob looks it up, then reads out)* "Gays in the Trade Union Movement," and I think this was one ... was probably the most important article I ever wrote for Gay Left, because I think I had something in almost every issue, and er, I was like trying to look at how trade unions should actually take on board the fact that they had, you know, that they had gay members, and we did use the term gay, we didn't say lesbian and gay or anything more complex, it was just gay members. And I tried to sort of say that you know like sometimes trade unions saw themselves just as being sort of narrow organisations that deal with, you know, bargaining and negotiating about salary levels, but I was trying to say that there are times when unions do things more broadly, and looked at the position of women in trade unions, and how they sometimes tried to erm, achieve changes in the position of women through trade union struggle, and also about racism. So then I was saying that given that unions have actually got a broader remit than sometimes um, is widely

acknowledged we actually ought actually to be doing something about er, gay people in unions as well.