

## **CLLR GUTHRIE MCKIE**

### **What were you doing in the 60s and 70s?**

Being outrageously irresponsible! I've always been politically engaged, I've been in the labour party a long time but I've only been a councillor 15 years.

### **Where you living here in the 70s?**

I've always lived in the other part of Westminster in Bayswater area.

### **What interaction did you have with the Bengali community in Westminster during that period?**

I think my very first one was in the early 60s when my friend took me for what was then called an Indian. I'd never been for an Indian! I'll always remember that first experience. I fell in love with curry! I think that's the experience of a lot of British White people. That's the first experience you have - the food. Once the food seduces you, that's it, it's a very important route into understanding the culture.

### **Do you remember what Westminster was like back then?**

My experience of Westminster and immigration was that the Black Caribbean community has the toughest time. The discrimination against black people in the 50s and 60s was horrendous, it was unbelievable.

I don't think the Bangladeshi community has experienced anything like that. I've still got some Jamaican friends and it was nothing like the discrimination they experienced 30 or 40 years ago.

### **Were there many Bengalis settling here?**

Well, Harrow Road, the area I represent has a long history of afro-Caribbean immigration. That's known as North Paddington and it's only in the 70s that the Bangladeshi community moved into that part so in some ways they benefited from the fact that the afro Caribbean community took the brunt of all the discrimination that by the time the Bangladeshi community arrived – it hadn't disappeared of course it hadn't – but it wasn't as brutal as it was. That's when the Bangladeshi community started up small businesses.

### **Do you remember what kind of businesses?**

It tended to be grocer's shops and there is a cultural difference if you look at south Indian or Sri Lankan shopkeepers they tend to replicate what white shopkeepers used to sell whereas when you get to Bangladeshi and Arabic they tend to siphon off into a specific type of food that they sell. Although it's hard to tell them that – they think there's still an audience here for that type of retail outlet but it is disappearing. So Bengalis started with a retail outlet which was very specific to their community which was different from other immigrants from the Asian subcontinent who tended to replicate what the British were doing.

### **In your experience, what kind of things did newly arrived Bengalis need support with?**

I think they've needed the same support as anybody else from a low income and I think the biggest problem in the Bengali community is the fact that the first generation women tended not to speak English and were often not literate. That's a big drawback for them and it's a drawback for talk about engagement with the wider community. It's not a drawback for their children of course because their children have been educated, speak English. But the sense of isolation of older Bengali women in the community is quite significant. I think it's probably too late now to go through an education process with them now they're in their 60s and 70s.

### **Do you think things weren't done to address that?**

I think the people that should have addressed it should have been the Bengali community but they didn't. And I'm not saying... because back home they didn't, they didn't have to do it. And I think there was a responsibility for Bengali men to do something and they didn't. I think if you get that resistance from the families, from the elder members of the family, it's difficult for the wider non-Bangladeshi community to try and influence that.

### **How about employment – what else were the Bengali community working in?**

Well, most of the Bengali women, like many other communities, didn't work in the first generation. They took a very traditional housewife role. Bengali men came in roughly the same groups as other people, some skilled but a lot of unskilled. A lot the unskilled would either end up working on the buses or in important unskilled work, not often well paid... could be working for the council, street cleaning. That was important work but not often well paid. For those that were unskilled, had no trade or profession, it meant that the levels of poverty that they would experience would be for a number of years to come and would be handed on to their children.

### **How did these newly arrived migrants navigate the systems in this country?**

I think there was a great difficulty. There were great barriers if you look at the way people in the mainstream community communicate and meet each other. This is the advantage the Afro-Caribbean community had, they had no trouble going into a pub, that's where you met British people, and they had no trouble going to parties or whatever it was. That was very difficult for the Bengali community, many of who just wouldn't go to a pub which meant that there was an area of contact that they would not be part of. The majority of the population wrongly interpreted that as people deliberately isolating themselves. It was a wrong interpretation but it was the way they saw it – here's a community that doesn't want to interact with us. That lack of ability to understand each other fed from the fact there was a community which for cultural and religious reasons had a different way of communicating.

### **How did that manifest itself?**

I think it manifested itself in people not understanding each other. If you don't have a dialogue with people it becomes difficult to understand what each other's position or point of view is. Because of either poor English and particularly if a Bengali man had poor English and strong religious views then of course he deliberately didn't mix – a) because he didn't speak the language and b) because they tended to go to pub and parties which is something you didn't do. Isolation probably increased considerably for that first generation.

**Do you think the needs of Bengali migrants have changed over the years?**

Of course it has, people will drive that change. We're now seeing young Bengalis have no trouble going into a pub. They may not have any alcohol, maybe an orange juice and talking to people, that's changed. And of course they speak English, as well as if not better than some of the white population. I think that's the change but there are still cultural ties with parents which make it difficult for some younger people. People, from all communities, often confuse culture and religion. They say that's my religion when it's their culture – this thing about veils is a cultural thing. The religion says nothing about that. It's about trying to have that dialogue – with the older generation they often say 'Well that's my religion' when it isn't really.

**What do you think are some of the motivations that brought Bengalis to London?**

To escape from poverty of course – the same reason I left Scotland.

**What were the immediate struggles or obstacles they faced?**

It must have been difficult for the first generation. They obviously imagined the British – they had some idea in their mind about it not being too different from Dhaka or wherever. There's no reason they could have worked into their minds that it was actually very different how people lived, that must have been a great cultural shock.

**Who supported them?**

Different groups set up and the one in my area is the Queens Park Bangladeshi association. There's one here and there's one in South Westminster. I'm not sure... often they perpetuated the problem because often their audience was the first generation Bangladeshis who understandably wanted their way of the world reinforced. I can understand why people wanted to do that – to go into a room where everyone spoke the same language as you and ate the same food as you. I think they could have done more and they should have done more. I'm disappointed in the Bangladeshi groups, I don't they're doing sufficient to draw the Bangladeshi community into an understanding of what it is to live in a more open society.

**What services do your local group provide?**

The QPBA? Not much! To give an example, there's a youth club in my ward, it's part of the London Tigers. It's Muslim Boys Club or something like that. A few years ago they asked for funding and we said we'd fund a youth club for boys and girls but not a boy's youth club. They wouldn't so we said we're not going to give you money to perpetuate separation between boys and girls. It's that sort of thing that I'd see more of. I'd like to see them challenging some of these things.

**Are there any Bengalis you know well?**

Ahh, we have four Bengali councillors in the Labour group!

**How do you think they have shaped the nature of politics and community in the area?**

I think they have done. I'm very proud of our Bengali councillors – you see how they have mixed their role in their communities and their role as a councillor.

**What do you think lies ahead for the Bengali community in London now?**

I think it's headed for great change. I mean I see it in people like you. I see people aged 18, 20, 22 on a career path that would be completely alien to their parents. Their parents must be very proud of them – they wouldn't understand the world that that takes them into. Being skilled and performing a career changes you as an individual, it opens your eyes and it widens your perspective of the world.