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Kieran Connell: I was going to ask first if you can remember what brought you to Birmingham in the first instance? Because you worked previously at LSE, is that right?

Dick Atkinson: Well, I did my PhD at LSE, and then was looking forward to a career in being a sociology lecturer, and doing research and lecturing full time. I applied to one or two places, and was accepted by Birmingham. Initially for a year, then moved to Manchester, for a year. A permanent job became available at Birmingham, I applied for that, and was turned down by the vice-chancellor, who objected to what I had done when I was there in the first year. So I was actually technically at Birmingham for two years, first one then in Manchester, and when they turned me down, various people said come anyway, and give the lectures you would have been giving in a sort of honorary capacity, so I was there for a couple of years.

Kieran Connell: When you first arrived there, the first time, how would you describe the atmosphere on campus, politically?

Dick Atkinson: Oh gosh, from the top down, conventional, getting on with business as usual. Students, a bit restless, a significant minority of students a bit restless. Noticing what had been happening in one or two other parts of the country and thinking oh should we be thinking along similar lines? And so when I came from the LSE, one or two of the students, and one or two of the more radical lecturers said 'Dick what was it like at the LSE? What did you do there? Can you give us a bit of advice?' So I was keen to get stuck in.

Kieran Connell: So were you quite heavily involved with the process, at LSE? Previously, whilst you were doing your PhD? What was your kind of involvement? Were you kind of ...?

Dick Atkinson: Crikey!

Kieran Connell: I know it is a long time ago.

Dick Atkinson: No, I suppose kind of informal advisor and 'small c' consultant to the Students Union, and to the students who were keen to try and get reforms and change.

Kieran Connell: I have been through the archives in Birmingham, and it seems like amongst the students, there was quite a lot of demand for further democratisation of the university structure. Would you say that is one of the key issues?

Dick Atkinson: That was the key issue, I would have said. That things are done to us, and we come and we are supposed to be happy with what exists, but actually we have got ... maybe we are young, but we have got ideas too and can there be a more democratic structure? Can we participate, can we be --- No! Well we would like to be. No! Well we will sit in, then.

Kieran Connell: What was Birmingham's sociology department like? Was Charles Madge still there when you arrived? Or had he left?

Dick Atkinson: Charles Madge, no he was there and he was one of the people who appointed me in the first place.

Kieran Connell: I mean he obviously, with his background in mass observation, quite a progressive figure?

Dick Atkinson: Yes, a very interesting guy, and one reason why I was glad to come to Birmingham, and his deputy, a guy called Guy Baldamus, who equally very interesting, very bright fellow, but not initially terribly keen on restless students, and just a bit worried that if it all comes from the sociology department, and the faculty of commerce and social science, will the powers that be not just be cross with the students, but be cross with me, Charles Madge and others, and so there was a fair bit of anxiety about what the repercussions might be on what was already thought by more conservative chemical engineers and whoever, a bit of a radical department anyway.

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Kieran Connell: At what point ... did you have any relationships with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies? Did you personally have any relations with the Centre for Cultural Studies? And did the sociology department more generally?

Dick Atkinson: Well a natural affinity anyway, academically. But I would say in a way, with Stuart Hall in particular, an immediate sympathy and empathy with what the students were doing. Someone who had the respect of lots of the more thoughtful and radical students and so Stuart was a substantial source of advice and encouragement to students.

Kieran Connell: So in terms of the actual sit-in at Birmingham, did you kind of take on a similar role to previously, a consultative role? Or were you slightly more active?

Dick Atkinson: Partly because now a lecturer, not a student, this only makes sense if the students are really keen so whilst I can advise and encourage, I shouldn't be in any formal sense leading.

Kieran Connell: And what are your reflections of the sit-in in Birmingham? I think it lasted for about a week didn't it, give or take a few days? Can you remember the kind of atmosphere, and the attitude of the university management towards the students?

Dick Atkinson: Well, I mentioned Stuart Hall and I talked about Guy Baldamus and Charles Madge. A small minority of staff, who were supportive and sympathetic, a large majority who were rather more 'small c' conservative and 'this is rocking the boat, it is not the job of students to be doing this sort of thing, let's just get on with the business of ordinary university life. I am the vice-chancellor, come on, I want to be running a ship with an even keel, not one where the boat is rocking.'

Kieran Connell: Was that Aitkin then the chancellor at that point? Or Hunter?

Dick Atkinson: Hunter I think.

Kieran Connell: Who had just recently arrived, I believe.

Dick Atkinson: I think so.

Kieran Connell: He was a bit unsure of how to ... And in terms of the Centre more generally, can you remember other figures at the Centre, like students? Do you remember the Centre being quite at the forefront of the student protests? You mentioned Stuart Hall was quite sympathetic, and he was obviously a research fellow?

Dick Atkinson: I am going to be bad at names! Two or three others I would have said from Cultural Studies, two or three from sociology and politics department, but not many.

Kieran Connell: Because obviously even by this point, Stuart Hall was quite a renowned figure, politically, with his background from the New Left. Do you think it was important to have someone of his stature? Kind of supporting?

Dick Atkinson: Certainly a lot of students respected him, and therefore valued the fact that he was clearly being sympathetic. I wouldn't have said he was crucial, I think they are of a mood to move in the direction of which they did anyway, but just felt encouraged and what is the word, legitimised by him being able to express sympathy and support.

Kieran Connell: Where did the politics of 1968 ... where did that end up going to? You mentioned it was based around the desire for further democratic participation in the university management. After 1968, where did that end up going off to? Because I know you have obviously moved into community politics for the last however many years it is. Is there a link?

Dick Atkinson: ... First up, I think I would say within Birmingham University and other universities, a modicum of change was in the system, students allowed to sit on the senate and things for the first time, two of them or whatever. But no substantial reorganisation of the system. In my second stint, having come back from Manchester, within that second year ---

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Kieran Connell: That would have been roughly about 1970 would you guess?

Dick Atkinson: 1971 ish.

Kieran Connell: Something like that.

Dick Atkinson: So happened that a couple of people from Bordesley Heath came to the university and said 'we know a bit about what has been going on, but actually you think you have got a need for reform, Bordesley Heath is in a terrible state, we need a bit of help. Anyone here interested in helping us? As a sociologist I am supposed to be interested in society so came and had a look, did one or two things, and before too long thought actually why am I doing sociology in the ivory tower, it would be much more interesting to get stuck into Bordesley Heath and see whether I can be of any use there. And it follows Bordesley Heath forum and so on. So I thought let us leave university and ...

Kieran Connell: Join the real world?

Dick Atkinson: Join the real world.

Kieran Connell: Had you always had, prior to that, did you had an inclination that you were slightly disillusioned with the ivory tower academia, and its relevance to the wider society? Or was it just the moment when you were invited up to Bordesley Heath?

Dick Atkinson: Yes, a bit disillusioned, but hadn't twigged that it would be sensible to be out there, in the real world, until people from the real world as it were found me, and said come and join us.

Kieran Connell: There are quite a few initiatives that sprang out of that similar kind of ethos, like for example Charles Critcher was involved in a project in Handsworth, called '40 or over'. Did you have links with that kind of ...

Dick Atkinson: Informal, and I kind of kept those sorts of links, and indeed Bordesley Heath now is one of 12 pilot neighbourhood renewal areas in the country, who have got links with other parts of the country, and some of the students of the day became involved in one or more of these local activities, so I would have said more substantial change took place in neighbourhoods around universities, than within the universities themselves.

Kieran Connell: So after 68 you obviously said the vice-chancellor blocked your permanent appointment after you had been in Manchester for a while? Do you think that is indicative for you of the institution of Birmingham University? In its kind of politics and its outlook of the higher echelons of management?

Dick Atkinson: ... Well any empire is nervous of a colony that wants to flex its muscles. There are people in the council of Birmingham and in government, who are nervous of neighbourhoods that are flexing their muscles and saying we can do more to help ourselves, if only you would stop doing things for and to us, and enabling us to do things for ourselves. Kind of same difference, really. So almost institutionally predictable, that people in positions of power would feel nervous about students out there in the colony saying 'can we have a bit more power ourselves? Can you have a bit less?'

Kieran Connell: In terms of when you established the Bordesley Heath forum, did you maintain any links to the more kind of progressive academics that were around in Birmingham?

Dick Atkinson: Well like Stuart?

Kieran Connell: So, did Stuart have some influence here?

Dick Atkinson: ... As a kind of kindred spirit, but not directly, but we kept in touch for quite a while.

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Kieran Connell: Do you think academics can have a role to play? A relevant role to play? Like Stuart, I guess you could argue that Stuart's career had always been trying to straddle that boundary between intellectual work and politically relevant work, because he obviously made the decision to leave.

Dick Atkinson: Well some disciplines more obviously than others, sociology, psychology, politics ought to be engaging with people in neighbourhoods and the community as a natural extension of their studies anyway. Whether they should actually leave university and become fully engaged in communities is up to an individual, and for them to make the choice.

Kieran Connell: So there is a lot of --- I know at the time there was a lot of Marxist theory that is becoming increasingly mainstream, like Gramsci's notion of, I don't know if you remember it, organic intellectuals? Things deemed irrelevant to ordinary people's lives. Did you, or do you still see yourself, as being an organic intellectual?

Dick Atkinson: Ish. Not necessarily fine Gramsci or Marx in particular, but there is some sort of affinity there.

Kieran Connell: Just finally then, I just wanted to ask about your reflections about where we are now? Politically? And the Bordesley Heath forum is still here, but obviously the wider politics have changed considerably since the late 1960s and 1970s. Is it difficult to kind of keep this community action going?

Dick Atkinson: Well the copy that you gave me to start with you have now changed, so I don't actually need it any longer. This is therefore draft, but you might find that interesting.

Kieran Connell: Oh I certainly would, yes. So this is something that you have written quite recently then?

Dick Atkinson: I will dig something else out for you, which is a year or two out, but that is still in the making. But politicians, nationally and locally, are going 'there is less money, does this mean cuts and less for less?' Whilst other people are saying 'actually the existing system wasn't that good at helping neighbourhoods like Bordesley Heath, is there a different way of doing things, that can produce more for less by, for example Bordesley Heath used to be ridden with prostitutes and pimps, the police would arrest a prostitute but she was out on the street corner, ready to pay off her fine, before the officer had finished their paperwork. So problems hadn't shifted at all. But a trade unionist, with a little bit of help from me, organised residents to take their chairs onto street corners, take down car kerb crawler registration numbers, who thought oh and shaming the demand away, the supply disappeared. So residents with very little money solved the problem that the police couldn't solve for a lot of money! And that is just one, Hamid there, was over Christmas. And at Easter, he was giving out food hampers to lone elderly people who if they weren't helped, might finish up in institutional care, at a cost of £50,000 a year, fact of life. Hamid keeps them living independently so that serves actually with a bit of lateral thinking the top-down doesn't necessarily work, when it does things to people, if it enables people, then ...

Kieran Connell: It is actually a more efficient way of doing it? So in a weird way, and I am sure you wouldn't agree with the language that David Cameron used, but you could call it something like the 'big society'?

Dick Atkinson: Well ...

Kieran Connell: Or someone might project that onto you?

Dick Atkinson: Abdullah who left just as you were coming in, Cameron has been here four or five times, and something like the third time said 'I am going to come back but I am here only for a couple of hours' and he had spent two or three days, 'is there anyone I can stay with, overnight?' Abdullah.

Kieran Connell: Oh really?

Dick Atkinson: So I would say we had an influence over development, but it is not being implemented very well, by the system. So I have written that, to say this is the way to do it.

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Kieran Connell: Great! Well Dick thank you very much for your time.

Dick Atkinson: Not at all. Hope it is of some use.

Kieran Connell: Very interesting.

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