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**Kensington and Chelsea Social Council's 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Talk**

**Speaker: Dr Tank Green**

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As I am sure you will know far better than I, Kensington and Chelsea Social Council was formed in 2002 by a merger between Chelsea and Notting Hill Social Councils. In this presentation, I will only talk about the first decade of the Notting Hill Social Council as, I have not done any research on Chelsea Social Council. So apologies in advance for that.

The talk is brief but will hopefully give you a nice overview of the early years of the Social Council in terms of:

- The key figures involved in the 1960s
- How the Social Council operated in the 1960s
- Some initiatives and projects that the Social Council was involved with in the 1960s

The Notting Hill Social Council (NHSC) was founded in 1960 by Revd David Mason of the Notting Hill Methodist Church on Lancaster Road. Mason wanted the Social Council to be an organisation through which local people could 'join together in the fight for better housing, better education, better health provision and better deals for Black and other new-comers to the Notting Hill area'.

Fundamentally, we can understand the Social Council as being the secular and political wing of the church through which Mason wanted to bring *all* members of the wider Notting Hill communities together to campaign for change. It is for this reason that Mason did not partner specifically, or only, with other Christian organisations. In fact, he first partnered with Donald Chesworth who was an agnostic Labour member of the London County Council for North Kensington. Mason's choice of partnerships was a self-conscious act to make sure that the political objectives of the Social Council weren't limited by the confines of a religious community. And I think the limitations he was thinking of were both in terms of outsider's perceptions of Christians, as well as the emphases that a specifically Christian organisation might have.

In terms of the core membership in that first decade, David Mason was the Chair, Donald Chesworth was the Director, and your very own Stephen Duckworth was the Treasurer from 1964. There were also many other professional social workers, teachers, and clergy involved. We can see that the core membership was overwhelmingly white and middle class, although not as masculine as the three names I have mentioned might make it seem. Given the racial demographics of the area at the time, it is therefore important to briefly pay tribute to the Social Council's Secretary, Pansy Jeffrey.

Pansy was originally from Guyana and had initially worked as a nurse and health visitor but began working in 'race relations' in Notting Hill in 1959, a year after the so-called 'race riots'. She was employed full-time as a social worker by the Family Welfare Association and based at the local Citizens' Advice Bureau. I have looked through some of Pansy's papers and it is clear the woman was a whirlwind of activity whose expertise was very much in demand. She was involved in a dizzying array of activities throughout her life, and Mason described her as 'first-rate and crucial to the life of the Social Council'.

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Pansy Jeffrey has stated that whilst it would be true to call the NHSC a 'multi-racial venture', it could not be considered a 'self-help' organisation, since the people it was trying to help were too busy trying to survive to have any sustained organisational input. At the same time though, Pansy did also say that black people were happy to make use of the various ventures which spun out from the Social Council, such as the evening GP surgeries for women and children, and the law centre.

So, whilst the core membership itself was not as diverse as the neighbourhood it stood to represent, the Social Council operated in an interesting way, and a way in which I think served to help it overcome the limitations of its core leadership. Fundamentally, in the first decade at least, the Social Council is best understood as an organisation which emphasised community partnerships. It placed this emphasis on partnerships in order to construct and facilitate larger coalitions which would be better equipped, and informed, to fight for community change.

This underlying philosophy of partnership manifested both in the wide variety of people and organisations the Social Council worked with, and in the fact that it chose its actions *only* after listening to the needs of the neighbourhood during the open monthly meetings. Not only did the Social Council work with more official organisations like the Race Relations Board, the Kensington and Chelsea Inter-Racial Council, the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), the Citizens Advice Bureau, and the London County Council, but the open monthly meetings made it easy and possible for local community activists to come, participate, and get support.

The monthly meetings were advertised in advance, generally held in an open space like the Adventure Playground, and the entire community of Notting Hill was encouraged to come. An important fact to note is that the Social Council's membership was open to individuals who lived or worked in the area, as well as organisations. At the beginning of the decade, around 20-30 people attended each meeting, but by the end of the decade it was more like 60-90 people.

Going by some of the accounts I have read, the debates held at the meetings were often intense and combative in terms of the different perspectives of the attendees. But this, for me, is what makes them so important. The meetings helped different members of the community hear other points of view and concerns. Although perhaps it's better to say different members of the community of communities, as the area was already quite fractured and segregated by this time. The monthly meetings widened people's perspectives, created contacts and networks, and encouraged action through consensus. Importantly, Mason himself believed that the meetings were 'a safety-valve for activists in the community' and the open secret of the success of the Social Council in the first twelve or so years of its existence.

We can say that a main concern of the Social Council was to co-ordinate the vastly different groups active in the district, and to try to bring these disparate groups together to form common programmes of action.<sup>1</sup> As Mason said, 'it was crucial that there should be maximum co-operation and that key individuals should know and respect each other. It was no good simply the clergy and the social workers getting together. It had to include way-out black leaders, the Community Workshop, radical groups of all shapes and sizes.'

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter Three of my thesis talks about the wider community activism landscape in Notting Hill in the 1960s, including an interesting and important story about Kensington and Chelsea Inter-Racial Council. Go here to download a copy: <https://ore.exeter.ac.uk/repository/handle/10871/24915>

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The vast majority of the community groups set up in the 1960s no longer exist and to be honest, when I was first doing my research into the Social Council, it didn't occur to me to look to see if they did. So, I was shocked when I finally thought to put the name into a search engine and you guys were returned!

The more I reflected on this, the more I became convinced that it was the focus on partnership and on bringing disparate groups together which was key to the Social Council's longevity and success. In general, I think the left is riven by a culture of perfectionism. By which I mean: the focus on the absolute moral and political perfection of our allies means that groups themselves fracture and splinter internally, and that coalitions with other organisations and groups are never quite achieved. The outcome of which is, fundamentally, the maintenance of the status quo. I think the main lesson to be learned from the Social Council is to think about how it managed to temporarily bridge these divides and to hold on to a bigger picture. Because in doing so, it facilitated and supported some really, really important social and community work.

The Social Council was involved in many different initiatives, but now I will turn to what I think are three key areas of their work in the sixties: youth, housing, and 'race'. However, rather than talk about 'race' as something distinct or separate to the Social Council's housing and youth work, I'm going to pay attention to how 'race' and racism impacted their work in those areas. I do this because another important aspect of the work of the Social Council, is that they tried to include an attention to 'race' in *all* their work, even if they were not always successful. They did not see 'race' as some kind of separate subject to be addressed in isolation, as was common to the more standard 'race relations' work of 'harmony' type groups at that time.

That said, the Social Council did run conferences in the first part of the sixties which sought to highlight 'race' in the context of Notting Hill. The conferences had speakers like the prominent academics Kenneth Little and Sheila Patterson, and the important black politician, activist, and GP David Pitt, to name a few. From the calibre of the speakers, it is clear that the work undertaken by the Social Council (and the Notting Hill Methodist Church more widely), was considered worthy of national attention.

The conferences petered out by the mid-sixties, and deliberately so as Revd Mason was anxious the Social Council should not become yet another 'talking shop' on 'race', or anything else for that matter. Mason wanted the Social Council to be an organisation of action, not words.

Thinking now about the youth work the Social Council was involved with in the 1960s. Children and young people were a significant concern for the Social Council, as they were for the wider Notting Hill activist communities. Whilst some of the initiatives were short-lived, for instance a drop-in centre run by volunteer doctors with psychological training; other projects like the Blenheim Project were as long running as yourselves.

Here I will briefly highlight the work undertaken through the Portobello Project, as it was also one of the most enduring projects the NHSC operated. Not only did it outlive the sixties, but it also proved so successful that by 1965, it was considered to be one of the best-established experiments in unattached youth work in the country. In the end, the Portobello Project was taken over by the ILEA in the early seventies.

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The Project started in 1963 in an attempt to respond to street gangs and otherwise 'unattached youth' between the ages of 16 to 21. What I like most about this project is that, rather than deciding what the young people of the area needed, the Social Council first embedded a youth worker on the street to make contact with the young people, gain their trust, and from there find out what *they* wanted and needed.

This was the period of the rise of coffee shop culture, and the young people expressed a desire to have one of their own. So, the Social Council secured a premise from Kensington Council for peppercorn rent and brought the young people in to decorate it so that they would have a sense of shared ownership in the venture.

The coffee shop was actually a kind of a proto-social enterprise: it operated on a paid-for membership basis, and a young person could only visit once as a guest, after which they needed to join. There was a maximum of 60 members at any given time. And as well as being a coffee shop, there were also things like a jukebox and table tennis, and access to a psychiatrist and a solicitor were also provided free of charge.

Remember this venture is coming off the back of the so-called 'race riots' of 1958 and there were still significant levels of white violence into the early sixties. So, it is probably not too surprising that the Project was initially highly segregated and only really used by white youths. However, by 1966, three years into the Project, things were showing signs of change. The youth worker, Paddy McCarthy, had finally managed to attract a significant proportion of Caribbean youth to the project, and he said relations with the white youths were good. Similarly, Pansy Jeffrey is quoted as saying that the Portobello Project was 'giving the lead to healthy race relations in the area'. David Mason also recalled that music, specifically reggae music, 'was a way of healing the rift between the black and white gangs'. The music served as a bridge between the two groups: not only did the white youths love the music, but it provided the black youths with a form of social power as they educated their white peers on it.

However, by late 1969 and into the early 1970s, things seem to have taken a turn for the worse as the white youths are again reported as being viciously racist. It is hard to know exactly why this was. The amount of black youths using the Project did increase rapidly in 1969, as a black sociology graduate called Terry Leander had been recruited to work exclusively with them. Was it that through this increase in numbers that the fragility of the so-called 'healthy race relations' was exposed? Or, was the increase in racism due to the wider national rise in racist violence that occurred into the early Seventies?

Either way, the Portobello Project was an interesting experiment in self-financing youth work. I'm not an expert on the history of youth work, but I think the ground-up approach of embedding the youth worker on the street to find out what the youth wanted and needed was inspired and probably rather revolutionary for its time. I also think that the issues around racism illustrate really well a more general problem that community workers and activists experienced during the sixties: even if they themselves wanted to overcome racism and bring people together, not all of the communities they worked with felt the same way.

To turn now to housing, concerns over this critical aspect of human life were raised throughout the Social Council's meetings of the sixties. Not only was there the problem of poor housing quality, but there were also exploitative landlords such as the infamous Rachman, overcrowding, and a shortage of housing in general. All of these problems were made worse when situations became racially charged by landlords

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refusing to let to black people or by charging them higher rents. The Social Council lobbied Kensington Council on numerous occasions over these and other housing related issues.

I will just highlight one of the housing-related projects that the Social Council was involved with: the Notting Hill Summer Project. To be clear, this was not the Social Council's baby – it was led by the Community Workshop – but David Mason and the Social Council were described as having a 'crucial role' by a contemporary, and it therefore demonstrates a good example of the partnership aspects of the Social Council's work.

The Notting Hill Summer Project took place in the summer of '67, and was inspired by the 1964 SNCC voter registration project in Mississippi. The organisers saw the Project as a radical, grass-roots community mobilisation and empowerment project, spurred on by the failures of local democratic procedures. The Summer Project's principal aim was to compile a register of housing conditions, something which was deemed necessary to know before housing in the area could be improved. Other aims included obtaining factual evidence to dispel racist myths around black people queue jumping the social housing list.

The Project received one hundred volunteers, most of whom were bussed-in university students. They surveyed over 8000 households and completed nearly 5,500 interviews. The size of the project meant the organisers enlisted the services of university researchers, local authority planners, and even a member of the Cabinet Office to assist in data analysis. This meant a two-year lag between the collection of the data and the release of the report, something which surely must have been an anti-climax for many involved.

The report was published in May 1969 and, unsurprisingly, found solid evidence of racial discrimination, overcrowding, and high rents. In fact, the *Observer* called it 'one of the most damning records of social neglect in London since the days of Charles Booth'.

Specifically, the report found that Caribbean households were the worst off: they suffered disproportionately from overcrowding and were charged much higher rents than their white working-class counterparts. Moreover, and familiar to a twenty-first century London, the report found that it was the ubiquity of the private landlord which had led to so many of the housing problems. Nearly 75% of households were privately rented, compared to 32% for Greater London as a whole. This led David Mason to declare that, 'This report must raise the question as to whether the private landlord has outlived his usefulness in areas like Notting Hill'.

Despite the anti-racist agenda of the Summer Project and despite there being two associated teach-ins on 'race' and housing with speakers like Stuart Hall, there was little black involvement in the data collection. This lack of involvement was explained in the *Kensington Post* by the local black journalist Patricia Philo. She said, 'Black people in North Kensington [...] do not need statistics to know they are not getting a fair deal. They meet and talk to each other, and they know they almost never come across anyone who has got a council house or a white-collar or supervisory job – and they know lots of their friends who pay as much if not more than the English for rotten houses or mortgages and can't get the kind of job for which they are qualified.'

The Summer Project highlights a moment when some white activists were sincerely attempting to grapple with racialised aspects of community activism, but were hindered in their efforts by both the racism of whites, and the frustrations of the black community they wished to show solidarity with. I think that a main

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issue stemmed from the fact that the white activists saw class as the defining factor in people's lives and wanted to unite black and white working-class people into one community defined by that. However, the reality was that working-class Notting Hill was actually a multitude of communities with conflicting and intersecting interests.

To finish, what I think is most valuable about the Social Council, is that it does not appear itself to have attempted to unite the various communities of Notting Hill into any form of a coherent whole. Rather, it seems as though Revd David Mason had a finger in as many different community pies as possible: he went for a strategy of involvement rather than unity, I suppose. For instance, you can find local news stories about his meetings with Black Power leaders as readily as you can find photos of him leading Palm Procession. So rather than *unite* people per se, I think that what he was doing with the Social Council was to create *temporary* bridges to facilitate *momentary and specific* community needs. Fundamentally, the Social Council was an umbrella organisation which used its own expertise and networks to facilitate and support smaller community projects.

I think that through Mason, the Social Council did try to be all things to all people, and I mean that in both a positive and a negative way. It is clear that the Social Council displeased more radical elements of the community at times with this conciliatory approach. But, at the same time, I also think Mason's desire to *temporarily* find common ground in order to achieve *specific* goals is precisely the lesson we need to take from the early years of your organisation. I think it is precisely why they achieved so much and precisely why the organisation still exists 60 years later.