

Interview Date:	12-08-2020	Interviewer:	Tom Crowley
Interviewee:	Ehtasham Haque	Organisation:	Tower Hamlets Council
Position:	Councillor		

Interview Between Tom Crowley (University of Cambridge) and Councillor Ehtasham Haque, Tower Hamlets Council. 12-08-2020

Tom Crowley 0:02

Okay, so we're recording. Um, yeah, I'll just introduce myself briefly. So, it's Tom Crowley speaking, from Cambridge University, speaking to Counsellor Ehtasham Haque from Tower Hamlets Council. I'm speaking on the 12th of August of 2020. And Ehtasham, obviously, you're speaking from your experience as a counsellor and your work as a counsellor but, of course, what you say will be inflected with your own personal perspective. Does that sound good?

Ehtasham Haque 0:49

Yep. Thanks for inviting me, Tom. Just to confirm that this is Counsellor Ehtasham Haque from Tower Hamlets Council and I'm participating based on my sort of personal capacity and not for presenting the Labour group's view of Tower Hamlets or the Labour Party.

Tom Crowley 1:12

Excellent, thank you. So yeah, this will be a bit of a one-way discussion because on the transcription, people want to hear what you say rather than me. So, I won't ask that many questions and just let you speak. But could you just fill us in a bit on the history of the Robert Milligan statue? You know, the history of the Council's involvement and your involvement? And then how things came to change and the statue came to be removed with the events of this summer?

Ehtasham Haque 1:51

Okay, so in terms of the history of Robert Milligan, Robert Milligan statue. Obviously statue is the history of the man and I've seen there are two entries now on Wikipedia one is Robert Milligan and another one is Robert Milligan statute because the statute itself has its own life. Robert Milligan was an architect or one of the architect of West India Dock in Isle of Dogs area, the Docklands area here. In late 18th and early 19th century. And the port, the West India Dock, was the hub of transatlantic slave trade, in a sense that Robert Milligan's family, used to own sugar plantation in Caribbean and from

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Participant permissions to record given

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The Summer 2020 Debate on How Britain Commemorates Its Past



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there they were trading sugar and gradually he literally founded West India Dock. Obviously later on, he was chairman of the West India Dock Company with another business partner of him. I think George Hibbert his name is.

So, he was commemorated, obviously later on by the business community within West India Dock and so on. Now he passed away, he died in 1809. And the Docklands Museum [Museum of London Docklands] situates just next to West India Quay. And there was this statue of Robert Milligan, which was initially— which were there until 1948 from its original commemoration, in I think 1909 or something? I'm not sure about the exact date but you'll find it online and that was re-erected in 1990, I believe to patronisation from Docklands Development Corporation. So that statue remained there. He owned 526 slave when he died, I think 1809— so that's who Robert Milligan was, and that's where Robert Milligan's statue was you know, was there for celebrating his life with no recognition of his of his role in slave trade and so on. So that's one story.

When George— when the movement began in the US, in Minneapolis, George Floyd was murdered and he had Black Lives Matter movement really touching people's emotion and what went on and became a sort of trigger point for many people's grievances over the years, hundreds of years and also recently and then you had obviously Edward Colston's statue brought down in broad daylight by the protesters, thrown into the water nearby.

Here I'm a local Councillor in Tower Hamlets. And we have our own struggle as a minority community. Being in the third richest local authority in the country, also being just next to the financial district Canary Warf, the level of inequality and discrimination is very apparent. You'll find in one hand during daytime when you see big bankers and the community that has been built in light of Canary Warf financial district, you know what they can afford. Then just next to them about— within less than a mile, you'll find social housing where we have overcrowded homes and families living barely spending only a couple of hundred pounds. So, I'm just giving you the context where it comes in. So when the Black Lives Matter movement started Colston's statue came down and we some of us knew about Robert Milligan's statue being there and that was being celebrated, then we thought, you know it's— and I think there was there was a— I don't know who it was but I know there was conversation and there was protest or complaints to Docklands Museum expressing disgust that Robert Milligan's statue should not be there, that seems like glorifying slave trade and so on. So, then I decided to start a petition. I thought it's not necessarily to condone what happened in Bristol with Edward Colston's statue. I thought there is a democratic way to do it. Let me start a petition and ask the relevant authorities to remove it peacefully.

Tom Crowley 8:01

Just quickly, did that petition happen— did you start that just when the Colston statue came down in Bristol? Or was it before?

Ehtasham Haque 8:09

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Yes. So, I think it was a similar time, I think just after that. So immediately after Edward Colston's statue came down, because then we were— I mean, I was wearing two hats. One was the activist and other one is the responsible counsellor. What I cannot inspire is another anarchy or a protest during the pandemic, people trying to bring down the statue. So I thought a petition is a good way forward. So I addressed the petition to— and so nothing happened in London by the time so my petition, you'll find it online it was in 38 degrees, if you just do "Ehtasham Haque Robert Milligan", you'll find all the [unintelligible] there. We first of all asked Sadiq Khan, actually to review the public realm. I said review how our statues or public ornaments shall I say, reflects the community that it resides by. And the second one was a specific ask to Mayor John Biggs, (is my Mayor as well), Mayor John Biggs of Tower Hamlets, to remove the statue immediately and to honour the activists, to honour the campaign, to honour George Floyd's life. And I think the third one was also I think contacting Canal and River Trust or Docklands Museum. We were not sure who owns the land. Was it London Museum, or was it Tower Hamlets Council or was it Canal River Trust? No one was sure who actually owns the statue, who owns the land and who should be responsible in removing it.

So as soon as I did the petition, the petition caught fire, it got like a 1000 signatures within 12 hours. I think it was— I think I did the petition on seventh of June, night, you'll be able to see it there. And then by eighth the whole day there was conversation negotiations going on what's going to happen? I then realised there is a lazy approach to it by all the organisations involved, they're not taking it seriously. They're thinking okay, you know it could be a listed structure, the statute itself, so they may need other permissions and so on and so forth. In the meantime, I started receiving a lot of opposition, a lot of support as well. Being in Docklands so they almost treat Robert Milligan as the father of Docklands father of the Island. So, you're talking about bringing down the father of the Island's statue? And I'm also a local councillor. Yeah. So, my prospects in getting re-election is not great.

Tom Crowley 11:17

So very quickly, um, who is so supportive of Milligan? Who treats him as the father of the Docklands?

Ehtasham Haque 11:43

That's a good question. There are leftover dock communities here, dockers or there are a good number of Conservative community here. Who are yet to appreciate or give into the reality that it's a very cosmopolitan, very diverse community here. And if you look at the history of race in Tower Hamlets and the struggles of the migrant communities, it wasn't long ago, even in 90s I mean, you had BNP, British National Party. Derek Beackon was his name. He was elected from this very Island from this Docklands, though he eventually lost and was kicked out. So what I'm trying to say is there are people in there who are yet to subscribe to more tolerant ideas to living and they feel it's okay, so what this was a great

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businessman and he, you know, he initiated building these docks and so on and so forth. And that very community still maintained in recognising those controversial figures starting from you have some major organisations and people behind it.

So there was a newspaper called Island News. And when they re-erected his statue, he was mentioned as the father of Isle of Dogs. And these are my study, like retrospective study, by the way. I didn't even know. So now more people know about Robert Milligan because his statue's brought down and what happened then actually before. So people walk past Robert Milligan statue, they didn't know who he was, you know, bar a few, like myself and some others who has a keen interest or were quite conscious about the very structure that ultimately, attempts do not make us feel equal.

So, when I was asked, why did you, you know, why do you think it was necessary to bring down the statue? My answer to that was that we want to feel equal before we're being equal. If you're sticking a statue of a slave trader in front of my doorstep, and you know, and you want us to feel okay about it, then that's not the best approach. It should not be there. It's offensive. It represents slavery, it represents oppression of our community's forefathers. So, we have closed those chapters. So why should they be represented in our public realm? So, I hope that answered the question.

So yeah, then the petition called fire and the whole day went in negotiating what's going to happen. Some people are opposing it, some people for it, and the Council not taking responsibility. The Council saying, we don't know if it's ours, it may be Canal River Trust, and also the Docklands Museum and also there was a lot of other politics involved. Let me not just go into that. I'm very prone to breaking my code of conduct as a Counsellor so I need to be very careful.

So then the second day I realised that the petition's gaining momentum and I also realised the opposition's also preparing to challenge this. And also, this is all happening within the context of you know, you still have COVID-19 pandemic still on there. And so, I declared that there will be a protest every day 6:30pm until the statue is brought down. And this was probably the first declaration of a protest planned outside the financial district, outside Canary Wharf. That's like the corporate hub. They would not want no disruption there, Tom, I can tell you that. So I don't know what conversation happened between the corporate world, the Council, the Docklands Museum, they then decided to next day, without even notifying, without like giving any— without communicating it, that they said they're going to bring it down. But then we all sort of spontaneously gathered there.

By the way, the day before what happened also, that's also part of history. Myself and a couple of my colleagues, we went to the statue and we covered it with a African cloth. We covered the face of the statue.

Tom Crowley 16:41

I know that image yeah, that's on our website.

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Ehtasham Haque 16:45

Yeah. Is that elaborated enough Tom?

Tom Crowley 16:54

Yeah, that's very good. Thank you. So, it was almost— something like 24 hours between you starting the petition and the statue being removed by the authorities, is that correct?

Ehtasham Haque 17:09

24 hours a bit more than 24. Yeah, roughly 24 hours. It was second day it was. So let's say I did the petition last night. And then today all day, we've come to this and tonight covered the— so if you look at the hours, yes, I'd say within 24 hours, it was covered. And within, I'd say, 38 hours, it was removed. It was removed exactly at 4pm on ninth of June.

Tom Crowley 17:50

And this was you more really in your activist role? You weren't having meetings with kind of other authorities to decide this?

Ehtasham Haque 17:57

No, no, no, no, it was solely as an activist and I had all my, you know, my cause signatories of the petition. That was my strength.

Tom Crowley 18:09

Could you maybe expand a little bit, you know, before the Colston statue came down, you obviously had been aware of the Robert Milligan statue. Could you maybe just talk a little bit about how, you know, you became aware of the statue and— yeah, maybe a little bit of background?

Ehtasham Haque 18:25

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I was aware of Robert Milligan's statue, but I wasn't very much aware of his role as a slave trader. Few people were aware. When I researched I found his role as a slave trader. That's when I decided to do the petition.

Tom Crowley 18:44

And that was this summer? With the general discussion around— that followed, you know museums making statements and so on. Following—

Ehtasham Haque 18:56

Yes and so there was two, three statements. Immediately what happened next day: Sadiq Khan declared the review of public realm in London that would reflect diverse community. And Mayor John Biggs issued a statement, um, I think it wasn't clear what his position was. I think— did he wait? I think he waited. So Canal and River Trust— everyone basically then— yes, this statement was issued by Canal and River Trust and Docklands Museum saying they are trying to establish who owns the statue and so on. And then the next day— so there was there was other interactions happening between the authorities, between London Museum, Tower Hamlets Council, Canal and River Trust, which I was not privy to.

Tom Crowley 19:51

And would you say you kind of got interested in the statue— sorry, am I right in saying that you became interested in the statue's link to slavery or began to research that almost prompted by the wider discussion following George Floyd's murder?

Ehtasham Haque 20:12

Yes, definitely.

Tom Crowley 20:14

Okay. Thank you. Um, I guess I've got another sort of area of interest which is how Tower Hamlets more widely is looking at, um, as you were calling it the public sphere and the commemoration of history in the public sphere, and particularly talking about the legacies of slavery or colonialism. Is there other stuff happening in Tower Hamlets?

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Ehtasham Haque 20:45

There was a piece of work that was commissioned. The Council entered into a consultation phase and people coming forward with objectionable, um, building names and monuments. That people would ideally like to see changed or removed. Like there's a street called Robert Milligan Street as well. And I think that's still ongoing.

Tom Crowley 21:16

Did that start this summer? When did that start?

Ehtasham Haque 21:20

It started immediately after Robert Milligan's statue was removed. the Council declared that, you know, we would like people to come forward with their views on street names, building names and monuments and that's still ongoing. I think the consultation came to an end, and probably we'll see when things move.

Tom Crowley 21:41

What about prior to Robert Milligan's statue coming down, had Tower Hamlets Council been involved with any other kind of, you know, controversial monuments or street names, within the public realm of Tower Hamlets?

Ehtasham Haque 22:03

There was controversies at times with school names. For example you have a large chunk of Bangladeshi population here. And also you have rich history of the last couple of hundred years. The East End or Tower Hamlets being the hub for Irish settlers, also Huguenots, Jewish population and then British Bangladeshi population. But the structures, or buildings or street names barely reflected that and the few achievements that were sort of recognised by the Council was— you can name Altab Ali Park. There is Altab Ali Park in East End, probably you were aware of that, was named after the martyr Altab Ali who was killed by racists in 1978.

And there are a few school names. We, the community— there was campaign, or there was decisions made against the sentiments of the population to change the name, like Osmani School. General M.A.G. Osmani, he was Bangladeshi, he was the army head of Bangladesh liberation movement, General M.A.G. Osmani. And there is a primary school named

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after him in Tower Hamlets. And I don't know exactly which year, I think it was two or three years back, there was a decision by the school that they needed to change the name and then there was protests by the community and we managed to retain the name of the school. That's one thing I can remember. I've mentioned Altab Ali. And, no, in terms of the political recognition of migrant communities here, it's still not as it should be. Still all the buildings and big monuments, big developments are reflecting predominately British white figures, rather than recognising many campaigns that has ultimately changed the course of history, not even just here, but throughout the world. Like Matchmaker Girls' Strike, suffragette movement started from here, British Labour Party was born here. Irish community, Somali community, British Bangladeshi community are quite big here as well, you'll barely find any street names, any building names or any monuments to commemorate the contribution of those communities or lives of those people who lived here.

Tom Crowley 23:51

That's really interesting, that's great to have that perspective, thank you. That's really good for this archive. Um, I think I've got one more question, if that's okay? And it's just going back to the Milligan statue. I know, you know, the Museum of London was, I guess, challenged by it or were uncomfortable with it. But do you know is there um, had there been other kind of campaigns relating to removing it or having an explanatory plaque next to it, or changing it in some way, in the past? That you're aware of?

Ehtasham Haque 25:43

I'm not aware of any other, particularly against Robert Milligan's statute. But I'm just aware of— I came to know that there was apparently some email conversation, some individuals complaining to London Museum that Robert Milligan's statue should not be there. It wasn't a campaign that anyone was aware of it was mainly probably individuals expressing their opinion.

Tom Crowley 26:13

That's excellent. Thank you very much Ehtasham. Is there anything else you want to add for the record?

Ehtasham Haque 26:21

I'd just like to say probably this is more— We have to understand it in a more comprehensive manner, that whole bringing down the statue and what are the emotions behind it from the community, rather than just looking at it as people

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objecting to just slave trader's statue being brought down. I think it's still very relevant to the reality of ethnic minority people, people who suffered because of colonialism or slave trade, but who have made this their home and who are facing institutional racism, or structural racism. And these are— though these are symbolic, but these symbols or this conversation, ultimately represent a grievance that are still out there. And it's very important to recognise that and address that. And we have a long way to go. Otherwise, yes, true, it's just trigger. I mean, often the suffering community or the communities that are suffering from inequality, they're not strong enough, assertive enough as a campaign group or as a political force. So, they just capitalise on these, these moments which triggers such thing and they make their voice heard, but they have to get back to their real life struggle on rat race earning bread and butter. They do not have the political means to really achieve the sort of equality that they deserve. So, it should be looked at with those footnotes in mind.

Tom Crowley 28:27

Thank you. Thank you. I will end the recording now.

Ehtasham Haque 28:33

Thanks, Tom.

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