

The Second
George Lansbury
Memorial Lecture

Thursday, 27 November 2014



Ken Loach in Conversation

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THE SECOND GEORGE LANSBURY MEMORIAL LECTURE

**Ken Loach
in Conversation**

with Sir Christopher Frayling

Spotlight, Hay Currie Street, Poplar

27 November 2014



Former Labour leader George Lansbury making a speech against the Unemployment Assistance Regulations, in 1936

Ken Loach in Conversation

Nigel Whiskin

Good evening,

As president of the George Lansbury Memorial Trust it is my pleasant duty to welcome you this evening.

Now what's going to happen is that Ken Loach is going to talk for about 25 minutes about film and politics; then there will be a question and answer session with Sir Christopher Frayling, and after that, there will be an opportunity for you to question Ken. At about 8 p.m. there will be a short break, after which Ken will introduce his wonderful film *Kes*.

With terrific support from St Mary's church, the little church in the middle of the Mile End road and its rector, the late Reverend Michael Peet and various other people both from within and without the East

End, and the Lansbury family, we decided to set up the George Lansbury Memorial Trust. We didn't want statues but rather to find ways to keep alive this great man's passion for and unwavering belief in social justice, equality and world disarmament. He was a man of great principle and much loved for it.

In particular we wanted to bring his life story and his political message to young people; that is, no matter how humble your origins, no matter your race or gender, religion or creed, there is so much you can do to create a fairer and better society for everyone.

I was George Lansbury's first great-grandson – the only reason I'm the president of the committee for I have no other qualification. There are other great-grandchildren here, not only that, there are also great-great-grandchildren and I'm pretty sure there are some great-great-great-grandchildren here as well.

The family has been inspired by this great man, who has been like a beacon of peace, hope and fairness for our lives. Not everything he did was necessarily wise. I'm not sure he was wise to resign his seat as a Labour MP for this constituency and stand as a suffragette candidate in 1912 in the subsequent by-election; a wonderful gesture, but he miscalculated, lost and was out of parliament for a decade.

He carried on trying to spread the socialist message, helped found the *Daily Herald*, and edited it for many years. He spent much time and energy closing dreaded workhouses. The Poplar Rates rebellion was a wonderful example to the rest of the country, then as now, of how to fight the establishment. He wound up being one of the most loved politicians of his day.

No wonder people sang the 'Red Flag' as his funeral procession went by. No wonder the old men of Poplar when I came here to the opening of the Lansbury estate in the mid-1950s told me with tears in their eyes of how they'd pawned their wedding rings to purchase the paper and print for Lansbury's election campaigns.

George Lansbury knew how to use the media and get his message across. There are newsreels including the one Ken Loach used of him speaking in Trafalgar Square in the film *The Spirit of '45* talking about how he wanted to build a New Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land.

Though those newsreels are dated they are in their way inspiring.

Our speakers tonight are both very distinguished. I will tell you how I met them, some 45 years ago travelling on the 7.10 train from Bath to Paddington. Sometimes we were joined by Peter Gabriel, sometimes Luke Rittner and Professor Rod Morgan. Up until that point I'd always thought Constable's oeuvre comprised just beautiful paintings of pastoral England, but according to the mantra of Leach and Frayling, they were examples of how the gentry were holding on to their assets, the ruling classes suppressing the poor and maintaining the status quo. What an education!

Without further ado, please give a very special welcome to the wonderful film maker Ken Loach.

Ken Loach

Well, I didn't hear the build-up. I hope nothing rude was said. Anyway, it's a privilege to be able to come and say a few words, I was going to say in memory but, in honour of George Lansbury who was formidable and an impressive man in the labour movement. I was only four when he died so my memory isn't great of the man himself but certainly his presence was part of the labour movement, the Labour party that did so well after the Second World War in 1945, so George Lansbury's name has always meant a lot to those active in Labour politics.

I do have a connection, a little connection to him. We did a film called *Days of Hope* in the early nineteen-seventies in a series of films about the Labour movement. And they began in 1916, and there was a recruiting scene in a town square, and there was a pacifist meeting in a church hall addressed by George Lansbury and he was played by an actor called Norman Tyrrell. He was an actor of the old school, and always learnt the lines get the job done and go home. He did well, he learnt the lines, and he looked quite like George Lansbury actually. And the end of the scene was an invasion by the crowd from the square whipped up in a kind of militarist fervour. And the scene was they dashed into the hall and thrashed the pacifists in the hall. And one way of doing the filming, to get a feeling of genuine surprise, you don't tell the actors what's going to happen. Well Norman, having an acute sense of what was going on, when he saw the crowd milling outside, he thought 'hang on there's going to be a bother here' so he positioned himself in line with the door and as the crowd burst in he managed to get himself propelled

out of the door, and then the fisticuffs took place, and the last thing to be seen was Norman disappearing into the distance unscathed while everyone else was being beaten about the brain. It was just the one scene, but we did put George Lansbury on film, I'm sure we didn't do him justice, but it was a nice moment.

I want to say two or three things really.

First of all, when I was asked to do this, being a last-minute kind of guy, two days ago I went into the library where I live, looking for a biography. Of course I have a vague memory of George Lansbury but I needed to know more detailed information. I went into the history section, nowt, nothing, absolutely shocking. Not only was there nothing about George Lansbury but there was nothing about of labour history whatsoever, nothing about the trade union movement, nothing about the early labour party, nothing of the development of the labour party, the struggles of socialism There was nothing, nothing about the pacifism in the first world war, nothing about the strikes of the twenties, nothing about the Labour party between the wars. Okay I couldn't find a biography about one person, that's excusable. I did however complain to the librarian, this is really intolerable, that a serious part, the main part of our history, our collective struggle is not there for people to know, is not available in public libraries. I do live in Bath so maybe there's a special excuse, but of course it was full of Churchill, the class warrior Churchill, and that wound me up even more, because if we have one enemy of the twentieth century, he's probably it.

So lots of royals, none of the heroes and great men of our struggles. But I think it's symptomatic of a wider problem, that is, to hang on to the culture of working class history, and this is something that has exercised historians at different times. There was a group of working class historians like Christopher Hill and E.P Thompson back in the sixties. To hang onto the culture of our struggle is absolutely vital, because if we don't remember and learn and understand that the struggle for social justice, for socialism, the struggle for common ownership, the struggle to make a dignified life for everybody has a long history, goes way back to the peasant revolt in 1381 and you can trace from there through the civil war through the levellers and diggers in the 18th century and the 19th century, people joining together with Tolpuddle, and the ideas to understand how society works, the inevitable class

conflict within society, the fact that there is a fracture down the centre of our world which means we are forever in conflict: If we don't understand that, and generations of people have gone before, to understand that to struggle against it, to find that better world, to find a pathway to that if that necessary history is denied us, that is an absolute act of treachery and betrayal of our past. We have to fight it and councils have to fight it, universities have to fight it, schools have to fight it, because it's ours, not the history of the monarchy, of the Churchills, of the Marlboroughs and their wars and their imperialist past; our history is the struggle for our human dignity and justice between men and women, and that's our history and its absolutely shocking it's not there for us to read.

When I was thinking of what I should say, the bits I remember of George Lansbury, there are some key points where his life is intersected with our preoccupations and I thought there were three but I only want to mention two in passing or I'll talk for too long.

The first one, of course, is the great issue for which George Lansbury is known which is the Poplar rates strike. The poorest councils had the greatest number of people to support and the poorest communities needed a greater amount of money to support them, so clearly there was an injustice there, and the Poplar council refused to send money to the London County Council to pay for the policing and the water because this is an injustice. They were sent to prison and they came out and in the end things changed, so in the long term I think it was a victory.

So the issue is how can communities resist? And I guess, a feature of our life now, is that there are many campaigns at local level, for the homeless, for disabled people, for the unemployed and campaigns for asylum seekers. I'm sure the East End of London and I'm sure here has many campaign and many people who are in them nourish their communities through their actions and by their contributions and the sense of solidarity they generate. And brilliant they are, too.

I met some health workers from Darlington who had marched to London to end the privatisation of the NHS and were patronized by one or two Labour politicians. I've heard of the campaign in the New Era housing estate that people here may have heard of that was sold to a consortium led by a Tory MP, who has, through shame, quitted the

consortium, but people will be evicted and flats will be let at a much higher rate. The main man of the consortium has of course bought himself a mansion and his companies are in tax exile land, so that's a fight to have.

But the big struggle was of course the Liverpool struggle. Liverpool council in the eighties I think, built houses for people at proper rent and proper prices and they were disowned by the Labour leadership in the same way as George Lansbury's council was disowned by the Labour leadership of his time. And the man in George Lansbury's time, Jimmy Thomas, led the rail workers union, called the 'waste alls', in the same way Kinnock purged the Labour party of the brave councillors that faced imprisonment and had been disbarred for looking after the interests of their community.

So clearly what we do need is leadership from the top to stop councils imposing the cuts, because if all the Labour councils, and the Greens (because they've done it as well) if all those councils said 'we're not going to implement the cuts, we're not going to administer it', we'd begin to have a grassroots movement that would challenge austerity. We'd begin to have a movement that challenges this bullying, and the tax on the poorest people. We need councils to take a leaf out of George Lansbury's book, but unite, to do it together and say 'we will not implement these cuts'. Yes they may go to prison and they may lose their allowances, but actually that's what we need, because the situation is desperate for so many people.

The second issue was, of course, pacifism, and how do you deal with the threat of fascism, with international oppression? And George Lansbury was of course a noted pacifist and Christian pacifist, and I'm sure there are people who know the answer to this, so I hope they tell me when we discuss this. I'd love to have known what George Lansbury's attitude to the Spanish Civil war was. Did he oppose those who volunteered to fight against fascism and for the democratically-elected republic with its socialist agenda? Did he oppose them or would he have supported it? And what would he do for example now, when clearly, of course the broader picture is that you need respect for international law, you need all nations to subscribe to the United Nations charter, to respect international law, to respect the Geneva Convention and intervention needs to be from the United Nations only. But in the

absence of that, what would his attitude be towards the oppression of Palestinians by Israel? How would he deal with that? Because that's a knotty question.

It was brought home to me just recently because I was involved in the Russell tribunal on Palestine in reference to Gaza, and the appalling, shocking, murderous activity that went on in Gaza this summer. The question is, how do you deal with that oppression, because the Palestinians are an oppressed people, when politicians as a whole, pretend that it is not happening and we stand by when the Geneva Convention is broken, and we invite Israel, we have arms deals and special trade agreements, and we find out that Israel is part of Europe. In football matches, suddenly the boundaries are redrawn, even worse, it's in the Eurovision song contest. I think most countries should vote to leave it, but nevertheless, there's Israel. Despite an absolute contempt for international law, the Geneva Convention, and yet, we tolerate it, what does civil society do in this situation? It's a big question to deal with there.

But the main point I want to come to is a decision that faced George Lansbury right at the start of his political career, and it is this. George Lansbury started his career as a Liberal and then he realised that the Liberal Party would not represent the issues of the working class, and he left.

Well that's an issue I think is facing us. He said 'Liberalism would progress only as far as the great moneybags of capitalism would allow it to progress', and then he left, and he tried to find a path through different left groups, and ended with the Independent Labour Party with its mixture of Marxists and social democrats and became part of the Labour party and it was then led by Ramsay MacDonald who towards the end of his career joined with the Tories. So it was a very mixed bag, and it was a mixed bag in the way we have now. We have different left groups, we have the Labour Party, the Greens, and Social Democrats and we have some Marxists and fragmented groups, all the problems George Lansbury faced over a century ago. And it seems like we've barely moved on.

But the questions is, are we at a similar point? Are we at a point of being in a party, or the mass party that claims to represent the claims of the people but no longer does that, and has no possibility of doing that? And that is the big question we're faced with. Labour has always been

a social democratic party, based on the mixed economy, part-public part-private. And its high point was in 1945 when it took into public ownership the utilities (gas, electric, water). We owned that, hard to imagine now, but we owned the transport system. We built the health service, we owned the mines we owned the steel industry at some point, we owned all that. But when you look at it, that's where it stopped. There was no attempt to change the economy into a workers' republic, to public ownership of the main industries with democratic control; it was never that; it was the infrastructure in which capitalism could then regenerate itself, that was the highpoint of social democracy. There were many great achievements and many people are spending their time trying to defend them and they are doing so now with the health service as it's falling apart beneath us. But it was a high point and we've never attained anything like it since then, on that scale. But now, it seems to me there is no social democracy, there is no mixed economy, everything is to be privatised. The Health Service is now open to the private providers. We briefly owned the north-eastern rail line, it's about to be privatised. The Royal Mail was privatised and when the Labour party was asked of its opinion, and I'm sure you remember what the spokesperson said, he said 'The Labour Party has no ideological objection to Royal Mail being privatised'. Well they argued over the price. The price not the principle. We heard about Eurostar only recently. The Labour party again had no disputes over the privatisation of the Eurostar, it's making a profit for us that can benefit us and go into our public services. What will the Labour party do? Nothing, nothing, they'll leave it to the private companies.

And so the Labour party is now the party of business, and in 1997 when Tony Blair said 'Labour means business' the more naive people thought that Labour would roll up their sleeves and do their work. No, he meant Labour means business, he meant Labour identified that the way this country should progress is when the interests of the businesses are satisfied, and that is the fault at the heart of social democracy, that the employer must make profit before you can defend your job, before you can ask for a wage rise, before you can defend your conditions, before you can keep the factory or the business or the service open, the employer must make a profit. And what does the employer need to make a profit? He needs cheap raw materials; he needs to reduce the

cost of Labour, the employer needs to increase his market share and sell as much as he can. Those are the imperatives that employer must abide by; they are not the system failing, that is the system working. When the employer cuts the workforce, that's the system working, because his obligation is to the shareholder not the community. And when Ed Miliband talks about responsible capitalism, it's a joke. If he means responsible to the community it's a joke, because he knows the employer is responsible to the shareholders first, last and in between. And anything we've got has been gained in the teeth of those imperative, and capitalism has developed to such an extent that it is war between the big corporations. So it is Aviva or Transco or Richard Branson. Why does Richard Branson have to make money out of our health service? I mean ages ago, someone told me the child services are being run by Virgin, why should Richard Branson make money for us to take care of our children, why should he make profits to send to his tax exile in the Bahamas, so we can look after our children. But that's the world that New Labour now supports, because it's only a question of price, not a question of principle.

And that's why, in the end, my answer to my own question is (laughs) that yes it is time, it is time. Lenin will know this quotation I'm sure, Lenin said that, to this effect 'we support the labour party like a rope supports a hanged man, time to cut the rope, let the corpse fall'. Because across the country people are leaving the Labour Party. We know that. They're leaving, they're going to the SNP in Scotland, or bizarrely they are going to UKIP here, which stands against the interests of working people here, cutting taxes for the rich, privatising even further, cutting benefits, everything that will do damage to ordinary people. They are Tories, supported by tory money. Winding up our fear of immigrants is very dangerous. We need political representation, we have a problem of political representation.

Someone sent me a story today It's too long to read the whole thing. Essentially it says a man's benefits were stopped. He was sick, had epilepsy and couldn't work, and he was receiving incapacity benefits. This just happened, his benefits were stopped. He committed suicide, hanged himself; it was in Sunderland, in the paper I got today. I'm from the Midlands, in a town in the Midlands. I went there two or three days ago, met a man there, a young man. He was in charity housing, trying

to work, looking for jobs. He was not on benefits because of the humiliation of it. He had been sanctioned, he was not on benefits. He was in charity housing. It was a Dickensian room. I mean, it was just unbelievable, there was nothing there. He had a second hand fridge in the corner of the room, immaculately clean. The person I was with said 'can we be cheeky and ask you what's in the fridge?' The lad said 'Okay'. He opened the fridge. There was nothing in the fridge. Not a thing in that fridge, not milk, or bread, nothing. We said 'have you ever been hungry?' He said 'last week, three days'. He didn't eat for three days. It was comparatively warm weather, so he had no heating on, but when winter comes that's worse, because then it's eat or heat, isn't it?

Another story the other day. The mother of a disabled child. £20 on the bedroom tax taken from her, benefits. She's having to sell whatever she's got to buy a winter coat for the disabled child.

A lad we heard was on agency work. Not on benefits because he was getting agency work; sometimes twenty hours, sometimes very little. No time to regenerate his application for benefits. He got a call at 5 in the morning, be at a warehouse at 6 in morning. He got there. It was the other side of town. He got there somehow. Six o'clock came, quarter past came. The foreman came out said 'who are you what do you want?' He said his name. He said I have a 12 hour shift. The foreman said 'no you don't, no work today, back home'. It's like the Dockers used to be on the cobbles, you know, scrambling to for work to get their book accepted by the boss. That's what we've allowed to happen, that's started to happen under the last Labour government, so I think it's time we started again.

If we don't, who will?
If not us, who?
And if not now, when?
Thanks a lot.

(Clapping)

Sir Christopher Frayling

Much to talk about. You often accuse critics of not dealing with issues but dealing with the brushstrokes, when they are talking about your films, so I'm going to talk about the issues but I want to talk about them in relation to your films as well Ken if I can towards the end. First of all I was at the William Morris exhibition which is at the National Portrait Gallery that actually begins with a quote from you. It's another socialist tradition. You've talked about Marxism. You've talked about the development of the Labour Party. But that other tradition from William Morris Lansbury was very fond of. You say 'Morris is more relevant today' – you know: creativity, community, fellowship etc. – 'than he's ever been'. Which I thought was an interesting comment, because Lansbury said, on Morris, 'There's more to life than Acts of Parliament and state bureaucracy, there's comradeship and communal wellbeing, because people are important.'

Can I push you on that?

Ken Loach

Yes, well, I mean, William Morris was clearly a very important man in the history of Socialism. I think the point I was trying to make was that people remember the wallpaper but they forget he was an organiser. He spent his later years going from group to group organising, helping to organise strikes. He went to meeting after meeting. I mean, he wore himself out.

His respect for craft and his respect for the dignity of Labour was central and his demand that everyone has the need for beauty in our lives and the beauty of what we have. A similar sentiment came later with a strike in America didn't it? We want bread but roses too. And it's the same sentiment. We are not wage slaves and people are not just wage slaves. What they choose to forget about Morris was for twenty years or more he slogged his guts out going around organising.

Sir Christopher Frayling

That's interesting. I once gave a lecture on the arts and crafts movement in China, in Shanghai, and at the end of the lecture, in 1990; I asked if there were any questions. The local secretary of the Communist Party said, 'Is it true that Mrs Thatcher banned the complete works of William

Morris because they were too Socialist?' I said 'that's a really interesting question, why do you think that?' He said 'well a friend of mine went up your famous Charing Cross road and he could only find picture books about wallpaper and no books about his socialism at all.' I said, 'I'm afraid that's called the market'. But it was really interesting, you're arguing from an absence because that Morris, I'm afraid, is the one that really got into the bloodstream. Not the collected lectures and he really was a very strong, indefatigable Socialist. And I was reading about the first meeting of the Independent Labour Party, and there were more quotes from Morris than from Marx, as a British tradition.

Ken Loach

Yes, but, Morris was not antipathetic to Marx. No, I mean absolutely, he understood the nature of class struggle.

Sir Christopher Frayling

Yes, there was a rather ironic thing. One of the exhibits at the V&A's William Morris exhibition was Morris's copy of *Das Kapital* in French. Property of J. Paul Getty, I love that, I'm sorry, there's all your contradictions in one go actually.

About this communal well-being and comradeship, in your films there's always (latterly anyway, in *Jimmy's Hall*, your most recent film we've seen) a strong sense of that communal well-being, of people having, or ordinary people having a really good time. There's always someone who's going to ruin it. Either a Stalinist or a Social Democrat will turn up and spoil things. But, you know, *Jimmy's Hall* is a kind of site of that communal wellbeing. And you go right back to the beginnings of your career such as *Up the Junction*, where the girls go out for a night in Clapham. People say your movies are gloomy but actually there's a strong optimism in them, about the communal, that strength.

Ken Loach

Yes, it's just a long tradition, a literary tradition, a film tradition of exuberance, of joy and fun and comedy, exemplified by Joan Littlewood's work, the great theatre director, she had the Theatre Royal at Stratford East, just to have a knees-up, you know, and fun and enjoyment, because ultimately it's not about individual enjoyment, It's about collective

enjoyment and at the heart of it there's a sense of solidarity and a sense of mutual support, comradeship. And that's an energy, that's a positive energy, so it's not just a distraction, it's not a sugar to coat the pill, it's a core value of what communities have.

Sir Christopher Frayling

It never quite lasts in your movies because someone comes along and spoils the fun.

Ken Loach

Yes, it is a drama.

Sir Christopher Frayling

But there's another thing that is a very common feature, which relates to that I think. I'm thinking about the scene in *Land and Freedom*, as you mentioned, the Spanish Civil War, where a group of five or six people sit around a table and have a discussion. In that particular case, about land ownership, common land ownership. And you get that extraordinary feeling of everyone really getting stuck in to an argument which doesn't feel scripted. I never quite know how you achieved that because they all look as though they really mean it, and they've lived it because they're all talking about they're personal experiences, you know, my cow won't give me any milk or whatever it is, how do you get that? Because there's usually that in your films, you have that discussion where it gets really heated up.

Ken Loach

First of all it's the essence of drama where you've got conflicting ideas, I make no other parallel than this, but I was bought up on Shakespeare's history plays where the Worcester and Gloucester and the stations in between get together to have a discussion on power, and where the treachery is and who can be trusted and how are they going to overthrow the king or how are they going to defeat the traitors at the gate. And they're actually talking politics and it's the cut and thrust of argument and it's always seemed to me, really the essence of drama, that. And I suppose you turn that to situations now, and it's the battle of ideas, and anybody who has been engaged in left politics over time has

been to those meetings, and it is the cut and thrust, and of course there are personal agendas and it isn't a dry academic argument, but it's the essence of how we move forward and the essence of what is progressive, and how do ideas emerge and how do we move forwards and what are the backward elements. Well we used to call them backward, well is it really backward? And how do you deal with it, I mean George Lansbury was brilliant on the women's issue. How do you deal with that where there's prejudice and bigotry?

Sir Christopher Frayling

I've occasionally watched you on *Question Time* usually on the BBC there's a notion of balance, and the truth lies in the middle. So there's someone from the Labour party, someone from the Conservative Party, and a maverick, and the truth lies in the middle and that's what they call balance. You're out here, and it's very invigorating because, there was an amazing moment when you turned to Nigel Farage and congratulated him and you said 'look I don't agree with what you've said but you've shaken up British politics and you've shown that it can be done'.

Ken Loach

It was the dreadful Neil Hamilton actually, it wasn't Farage.

Sir Christopher Frayling

Oh I thought it was Farage.

Ken Loach

It was Neil Hamilton with the spectacular waistcoat.

Sir Christopher Frayling

Right, but where's this balance point? It's somewhere in the middle isn't it, and you're not in the middle... (laughter). Alright, you're not going to take the bait on that one.

Ken Loach

This is how they control. What I was trying to say earlier, they control our consciousness by denying our history. They control consciousness by who they allow to speak and where they put the point of balance.

They are within the Westminster bubble, so the point of balance is between New Labour and the coalition, so it's a tiny kind of area for discussion. So when UKIP come along and say 'get rid of the immigrants and we will all be fine', they're suddenly a voice, and what is amazing is that they are given chance after chance after chance; every programme now.

Sir Christopher Frayling

But what you were saying on *Question Time*, at least they've shown the pattern of politics can be changed. I don't know, do you have a sneaking admiration for that? Not for what they say at all, I'm not saying that, but actually shaking it up and doing something new.

Ken Loach

Well, if I said it I think I should have qualified it really. It needs qualification that. Yes they've established another party like the SDP did briefly. Established a new party that suddenly looks like it can take off, but UKIP have had the soil fertilized with *The Mail*, *The Express*, *The Sun*, and the BBC and ITV following that agenda of immigrants getting housing, immigrants getting benefits, immigrants getting jobs, immigrants sending money back, all that, or, an unmarried woman with six kids getting a big house. All these hate stories prepare the way, so when a party comes along and says what really is unacceptable, there's a racism underneath it you know, let's not kid ourselves, but when they say 'well we've got to do something about these immigrants, we've got to do something about these immigrant cheats', the ground is being prepared, whereas from the Left, of course, you have to fight the whole preconception.

And so, I guess I should have said, I was amiss if I didn't say it, I'm sure you're right, because yes, I think I said, we need a UKIP of the left, it was a rather glib phrase.

Sir Christopher Frayling

You got a ripple of applause.

Ken Loach

It was a rather glib phrase, but clearly the situations are different in that way.

Sir Christopher Frayling

The third thing about your films is that really since the mid-sixties when you cut your teeth on all those Wednesday plays for the BBC (I think you did ten, including *Cathy Come Home*) your preferred style is fiction for the personal relationships, but against the documentary background. It's unique to you I think and there are characters to root for and engage with. But it's in a very concrete setting. The Wednesday play used to follow the news, and it was almost seamless. You're watching the news and suddenly you have something that looks very much like a documentary, but actually it has Carol White sitting at the rail station with her children taken away from her. You decided on that approach quite early on I think whereas many others have adopted a whacky, surreal, odd, breaking-the-flow approach to politics where the way to get people to think is to do grotesque things. Why did you go for that extreme realism, because it's in all your films right back to the mid-sixties?

Ken Loach

Well, I guess there are a number of things. First of all I like that sort of fracture. A fiction should look like realistic fiction and then you break it with a fact, a documentary fact. And in a way, this was nicked from Joan Littlewood again from *Oh! What a Lovely War!*, you know. You've got the fiction then you've got the numbers of the casualties.

Sir Christopher Frayling

You did that in *Cathy Come Home*, you actually had the statistics.

Ken Loach

It was nicked from Joan really, so I owe her a lot. And also I love the old documentaries, the old GPO documentaries and real people talking, and to try to capture that sense of absolute authenticity. You believe the characters you are seeing really are them, and you engage with them. I think in a way that's very touching. But of course it's a film star playing that person, it's a well-known actor playing that person, so it creates a barrier.

Sir Christopher Frayling

But that raises another point about all your films, the mixture of untrained actors. David Bradley in *Kes*, you found him in a school. Next

door to Colin Welland and all the other well-known actors, and how do you manage that? It's one thing to use an amateur actor, and I remember talking to Gillo Pontecorvo about it at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts (I think you were there actually that night, do you remember?), talking about using amateur actors in *The Battle of Algiers* and mixing them with professional actors. It's one thing to have amateurs but you turn the lights on, you do several takes, how do you manage to capture that, almost unselfconscious quality? In that sort of circumstance? Because it's so artificial. You're on a film set, you've got the lights on, you're doing several takes, the director's telling you, or creating a circumstance, and yet you manage to get them to seem completely authentic.

Ken Loach

Well it's a bit of sleight-of-hand really.

Sir Christopher Frayling

No, you must have techniques for doing that.

Ken Loach

It's much simpler than it sounds because first of all you treat everyone the same, when you come to start filming. You'll had improvised the little scenes that would have happened before the film starts like, if you've got a family, you go together as a family and you do a family scene so they relate to each other as family members. And then you go through the film in chronological order so the film unfolds itself so all the relationships that existed before the story begins but they don't know how it's going to end.

Sir Christopher Frayling

So you don't give them the script, you give them the page of the day or something?

Ken Loach

Well, if they've got a lot of dialogue you might give it to them a few days beforehand. Sometimes it can change. We did a film called *Bed of Roses* in Los Angeles about two sisters who work as cleaners. They were working as janitors, as office cleaners in a big office block, and they

went on strike, and the one sister betrayed the strike, and the younger sister comes to meet the older sister and says 'you betrayed us, why did you do it?'. They were both Mexican, the older sister then tells the younger sister something she didn't know, that when she came to the States first, when she was caught at the border in Mexico, she'd worked as a prostitute to send money back to the family, and told the family she was in America. She wasn't, she was working as a hooker and sending money back. We hadn't told the younger girl that this was the case so the girl heard it first when the sister said it.

Sir Christopher Frayling

When you were rolling?

Ken Loach

When we were turning, yes.

And we'd thought that they would split and the younger one would leave, in fact, when she told her this story, the younger woman was devastated, and maybe we should have seen it, she was devastated, she wept, and it brought them together, and her instinct was right and the script was not right, so we then had to amend the next few scenes to bring it back on track, which is not difficult. But the point is to make something real happen as much as you can

Sir Christopher Frayling

But doesn't that mean you're using the first take a lot?

Ken Loach

Yes, but then you amend it, you get the surprise and that will last for a few takes. You live off it you know, it creates an adrenaline shot really.

Sir Christopher Frayling

The other essential ingredient I think is the lighting, because in most films, (*Kes* is a very good example of this actually) there's Hollywood lighting. If you've got a principal, you've got to light it and so the light shines in their eyes and they sparkle, exactly. And then you go to the reverse shot. So everything is on the actor, and they've got to sit in exactly the right place to get that effect. You have this generalised

lighting where you're lighting the spaces not the people so they can move about as the mood takes them. I think that's right, isn't it? And I'm not sure you didn't start this with *Kes*, with Chris Menges the cinematographer, that kind of light which frees you to allow the actors to do all sorts of semi-improvisational things within that space. Is that right?

Ken Loach

That is right. I learned a lot from Chris Menges. He was a wonderful cameraman, and he took what little I know about light and he taught me and it was to light the space. The point was the light is democratic. It falls on main character and everyone else alike, and you can undermine a truthful performance with bad lighting the same way you can undermine a truthful performance in the wrong lens or too much music, so all the elements are quite fragile in supporting the truth of what you're trying to do. But that's true; the light has to be democratic. It's also more sympathetic.

Sir Christopher Frayling

That's interesting. The final thing, generalising about all your film work is that you like a repertory company of people to work with. I don't mean in the actors. I mean behind the camera, production designer, and cinematographer. Jim Allen, now Paul Laverty. Producer Tony Garnett for a long time from the sixties through to the late seventies I guess. Now you have the same two producers each time. Is that important to you? That the process of making a film is a gathering of this community of people, who last worked together on one of your films. Maybe they worked on other things, but you're the one who brings them all together. Is that important to your process?

Ken Loach

Absolutely, because it's a shared taste. The point is making a film is the summary of many different crafts. You've mentioned them; sound, camera, costume, acting. It's a summary of all those crafts, and normally everyone will go along and do a professional job, but it doesn't have a single eye. One of the director's jobs is to bring everyone together but to give it a single author, and so developing that authorial voice or

perception is suggesting that approach, and so you find people who have that same perception, that vision, and just work it out together. So the camera work is 'well I learned a lot from Chris' but it's always a shared view.

Sir Christopher Frayling

Presumably you completely trust them because you've worked with them before, so you can be sure that it's all going to work, as a unit.

Ken Loach

You share every decision all the time. You know, where is the camera, what is the lens, where is the light. It's a collective discussion on the day. And the preparation of course; 'can we work in these locations?' So everything is shared but the point being, and the most important point of all, is that when you see a credit that says 'a film by' then the name of the director, and you hear director's talking about 'my film', you're looking at a massive ego because it cannot be. It can't be the director's film because what's everyone else been doing? You know, did they not turn up that day?

Sir Christopher Frayling

It's as a metaphorical author, or distilled into that one name.

Ken Loach

It has to be a group. Did the director operate the camera then jump in front of it?

Sir Christopher Frayling

When that's started, 'a film by' as the credit, as the famous story of Billy Wilder who didn't agree with that at all, being driven round Hollywood and he went past this house and he said 'is that a house by Otto Preminger or Otto Preminger's house?' There were all these disputes about how do you express it as a credit?

Can I just ask you one thing more before I open it up? One of your most famous scenes in all your work is *Cathy Come Home*, with Carol White sitting on the rail station with her two children, and the cameras quite a long way away. She's sitting there and all these passers-by go

past her, and then the police arrive, and take her children away from her. It's an extraordinary scene and it's shredding, actually. It's the one that everyone remembers. But, how did you do that? Because you're on a real railway station and there are real people it seems, not actors, not extras, walking past, so then you're capturing something that really happened and then adding to it this very dramatic scene – how did you do that?

Ken Loach

Well, I think it was Liverpool Street actually, and we just put the cameras way back. I don't think we needed a camera hide because it was quite busy and people were moving around a lot. You know, you see people on the rail stations. There are always people fiddling around doing stuff, so you don't take much notice. I think probably the cameraman was looking through the camera but other people were looking the other way or busying themselves, so that nobody would take much notice. Then obviously we didn't have mobile phones in those days, you'd just do it by semaphore. You know, I'd say turn over and then give a thumbs up. Carol sadly she was sitting there for some time and she knew that something would happen at some point and then just a series of communications just by a sign to one person over there, to one person over there to one person over there (signals) who would cue the social workers and the police.

Sir Christopher Frayling

Was the camera hidden?

Ken Loach

I don't remember. I think it was tucked away in a corner where no one would notice it, but people in railway stations they're running about anyway you know. It's easier than you think actually.

Sir Christopher Frayling

Did you have permission?

Ken Loach

I can't remember (laughs).

Sir Christopher Frayling

They hadn't cordoned it off, from the public or anything like that?

Ken Loach

No, I think we just went and did it.

Sir Christopher Frayling

No, it looks like that, but the audience I'm sure will remember the scene is the great climax of *Cathy Come Home*.

Although we've overrun slightly I'd like to do five or ten minutes with your chance, ladies and gentlemen, to ask Ken anything about anything; about his talk and matters arising from George Lansbury and urgent matters arising from George Lansbury, and indeed about the films. Then we're going to have a little break and then Ken will introduce his film *Kes*.

Does anyone know George Lansbury's attitude toward to the international brigades in the Spanish Civil War? Is there any specialist here who would know that?

Well there's your starter for ten, any researchers to find out. The concept being that there are just wars, and that in his view the Second World War may not necessarily have been one of them; and the Spanish Civil War – before the Stalinists arrived, at any rate – was one of them.

Ken Loach

There are two issues with the Spanish Civil War that apply to the Israel-Palestine situation, actually they aren't parallel. But in Spain there was a fascist invasion of the democratic government. The politicians did nothing, this is the parallel. The politicians did nothing, and quite clearly bad things were happening. What does the international community do? What does civil society do? Not the politicians, what does civil society do? There the bravest, the flowers of their generation went to fight for the republic. Now have the situation with the oppression of the Palestinians. The politicians again are doing nothing. The question is what do the citizens do to defend international law? So I suppose that's the only parallel.

Sir Christopher Frayling

I remember a little reminiscence, we did an evening with the Great Italian film director (it was actually just a month before he died) Gillo Pontecorvo. You think, and I certainly think *The Battle of Algiers* is one of the greatest films ever made (Loach nods). And I asked him the question who did he think had inherited the mantle of Gillo Pontecorvo, who had that kind of fire in their belly? He said, 'just one, Ken Loach' (Italian impression). And luckily you were sitting there.

Ken Loach

He was a lovely guy.

Sir Christopher Frayling

And he's right about that, and it was lovely because his memory was gone so he couldn't answer most questions but he could answer that.

(Points to attendee)

Can I just repeat that in case you hadn't heard? 'To what extent was *Land of Freedom* based on *Homage to Catalonia* by George Orwell? Was Ken ever tempted to do a version of *Homage to Catalonia*?'

Ken Loach

A lot of the evidence and the incidents we drew from *Homage to Catalonia* but from other books as well. The great *Spanish Notebook* was another and *Personal Testimonies* as well. The whole end of the film was drawn from people we'd met and who'd told us their stories. But we didn't base it on Orwell's book because we wanted a working-class man to go, a man who was unemployed.

Sir Christopher Frayling

Not an old Etonian?

Ken Loach

Not, not an old Etonian.

But Orwell did transcend his background unlike some of our politicians.

Attendee

I'm interested in knowing when you first had an interest in politics or film-making?

Ken Loach

Well they grew side by side, mainly. I went to an old university and being from just an ordinary family from a little industrial town in the Midlands I'd never seen wealth on the scale that I saw when I went to university, and that triggered something. When you see the equivalent of the Bullingdon boys now, which I did in the late nineteen fifties. More arrogance then, I think, even than now, they've tempered their behaviour. But the kind of arrogance based on the expectation to being the rulers of the country, which of course they are, and their wealth and their fast cars and that. There wasn't a jealousy. I didn't envy them but was just aware, suddenly aware that there was this grotesque privilege.

Sir Christopher Frayling

But you were studying law?

Ken Loach

I was studying, yes, I didn't study much law.

Sir Christopher Frayling

No, no, no but I wondered had you studied law, not gone into television at the first instance, whether you've ever thought, if you were a human rights lawyer you would be able to, you know, achieve a huge amount politically? I don't know what you feel about that?

Ken Loach

I'd be a terrible lawyer though, Chris. My memory is bad, I get too, too involved. I wouldn't be the greatest lawyer. But then working in television and working with some great writers, that really did it for me. The most significant for me was Jim Allen who was a working class man from Manchester, he had been a dock worker, a mine worker, a building worker and he was a political agitator. He'd go to a building site and organise everyone into the union, and then he started writing. I learnt from him.

Sir Christopher Frayling

You've got *Days of Hope*, *Hidden Agenda*, *Riff Raff*, *Raining Stones*, and *Land of Freedom* – all Jim Allen. I remember in Bath he used to visit you and I was always fantasizing about what you might be discussing.

Ken Loach

But the big question is, can we put up with the Labour Party? This is the issue, we're at a face, when you leave this place, you've got an election coming in five months. Are we going to put them back? Can we put them back? What will they do?

Attendee

Who would we put in?

Ken Loach

Well who do we put in? Do we need a new party? To do to the Labour Party what UKIP has done to the Tories and pull them to the left?

I think we do, I'm involved with Left Unity but I don't know whether they can achieve it. I hope they can but there are other parties, there's the trade union and socialist coalition, some good people in that. I think there are good people in Left Unity.

Sir Christopher Frayling

Comparing the publicity and profile of Left Unity in our major newspapers with UKIP is quite salutary.

Ken Loach

Well because UKIP will do the job that the ruling class wants done, that's why. I mean it's a very clear class question, they are being promoted by the press and that is being reflected by the broadcast treatment.

Sir Christopher Frayling

What tends to happen Ken, is that, generalising, people feeling disillusioned as you are with the main parties, just don't vote at all. Because they don't feel there's a credible alternative, so 'I won't go out that day'. So you get incredibly low polling numbers, percentages.

Ken Loach

But that's precisely why we have to act; I think we have to join. If the Left sees the social democratic party crumbling and the Left cannot get its act together to put together a credible party on the left, to represent the interests; you know, full employment, decent pension, proper healthcare, public services, public ownership of the utilities.

If we cannot get that together, what a historic failure it is. I think it's a massive failure. We'll wait for the Labour Party to collapse. Well they are collapsing and where are we? If the people don't do it, what do we do?

Sir Christopher Frayling

When did you first become disillusioned by the Labour Party? Reading interviews with you, I think when Harold Wilson started you had high hopes, did you not in the mid-sixties?

Ken Loach

Yes, I was very young, and we campaigned. They said it took us two years to see through Wilson, and it wasn't much longer than that. He was a right-winger and we knew he was a right-winger then. But again, you see, what has always bedevilled us. We said 'we've had a long period of Tory rule; we've got to get the Tories out at all costs, so we'll buy Wilson'. So, okay, we do that, and you see what happens. Some older comrades here will remember. You had the price and incomes policy. The left-wingers like Jack Jones and Hugh Scanlon settling for a flat increase of the sixpenny, Barbara Castle's *In Place of Strife*, where she's trying to shackle the unions. We had all that, and then the Tories got back in massively with Thatcher, and it was 'Christ we've got to get the Tories out'. So, never mind that Blair is New Labour, we know exactly what his politics are, but people still voted for him, and now we're in the same situation, and each time the Labour Party's moved to the right, and now it's moving to the right again because the whole centre of gravity of politics has moved to the right and people are saying 'Oh we've got to vote Labour, because we've got to get them out'. But look at the difference between the two.

Sir Christopher Frayling

No, I like hearing what you're saying, but then in credible political terms, this time next year, I'm not sure what you do.

Ken Loach

Well, you've got to do it now, you've got to join those groups. Join the Greens and shift them to the Left, whichever group it is. Join the trade unions; get the trade unions to stop funding people who are going to have them by the throat.

Attendee

Do you think that we should revive the ILP? George Lansbury was associated with for a long time. Maybe you'd call it 'UKILP'?

Ken Loach

Well should we revive the ILP? Well I think, what's in a name? I think there are good people trying to do that general principle. Whether it's called the ILP or not, I'm not greatly bothered. Left Unity is affiliated to Podemos in Spain and to Syriza in Greece and the European Left so I think it's as good a vehicle as any, so, join and propose a name change next conference, I'll happily go along with that. The main thing is whatever we call it we have to get our act together.

Attendee

It's a non-political question. I just want to say that whatever I've seen, I haven't seen all the movies but they made me cry occasionally and are so realistic. We had a director in India, Satyajit Ray, and he used to make very similar films, so I just wondered if you have seen some of his films?

Ken Loach

I love his films. They are beautiful films and very humane and very compassionate and draw you into the characters, and you understand them and you understand their dilemmas and you understand their pain and their wry humour. A wonderful director.

Sir Christopher Frayling

I'm going to ask a final question. After *Jimmy's Hall* came out, you announced that you weren't going to make any more films, that this the time to hang up your boots, but I hear a rumour that you're going to do another one. You're in danger of becoming like Frank Sinatra, kept doing positively the farewell concert. Is there something in the pipeline?

Ken Loach

The film you mention, *Jimmy's Hall*, it's a period film it's set in the west of Ireland.

Sir Christopher Frayling

Great film by the way if you haven't seen it, it's come out on DVD, I really thought it was one of your best Ken.

Ken Loach

That's nice. It was quite hard work really because I was away from home most of 18 months, and the last shooting period was about seven weeks. The alarm goes off at half five in the morning and you get back at ten o'clock at night and you do it day after day, and when you get into the autumn, the sere and yellow leaf, you begin to think that maybe it's time for a younger man or woman to do this. So you know I thought I can't do this again. But actually time passes and you think, well, you know, there's so much to do, there's so many stories to tell aren't there? There are so many things to say and people to meet and, so we're scratching around on something. If we could do it and it didn't rain too hard and you didn't have to get up so early and we could do it quite quickly, maybe.

Sir Christopher Frayling

But you say something on the extras of *Jimmy's Hall* that I think is our punch line really. You do something very modest and generous and you're giving a speech in a field and all the local people who are going to have to live with the film unit around them and you say 'I'm a film maker but actually organising politically is much more important than film making'. Maybe that's our punch line. Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen.

Introduction to Screening of *Kes*

Ken Loach

Well, thanks very much, thanks for coming back most of you.

I'm not sure whether the ones who are missing are being bored to death or have joined the party, but I hope it's the latter.

So, *Kes*, we made it in 1968 and it began life through the producer I was working with, Tony Garnett. We worked together at the BBC, and Tony was always on the lookout for new writers and he read a book by a writer called Barry Hines called *The Blinder*. It's about football, about a good young footballer, and on the strength of that Tony went to him and said 'look we'd love you to write a story for us to put on television'. And Barry said 'look I can't do that because I'm writing a book about a young lad who trains a kestrel hawk'. Barry was a teacher, he taught P.E at a school in Barnsley and he said 'wait until I've finished this book and we'll talk again'. So we read the book when it was done, and it was a lovely book called *A Kestrel for a Knave* which is a quotation from a medieval book of falconry grading the different hawks and which level of society they're appropriate for, and it's a kestrel for a knave. And the knave is a young lad called Billy Casper who's no good to anybody, completely useless lad, and Barry said he knew lads like this at school. It's a lovely book and we thought, well, we're going to try to make a film of it, which we did.

We thought, if the thesis of the book is that there are many kids – probably the majority – are marked out for a certain role in life. In the case of our divided education system at the time, the secondary modern school where the kids who went there were marked out for manual labour or skilled labour, but a large chunk of them for manual labour were unskilled labour and Billy Casper was one such and that was his role. And Barry's thought was that these kids have many talents, many abilities, they're individual, they're idiosyncratic, they do extraordinary things. But the school system can't afford to see that because then we'd have an obligation to them so we choose not to see that, we choose to see them as people that are only fit for manual labour because that's what the economy needs.

And we thought if there's something in that we don't want to search the whole of England for Billy Casper, we don't even need to scour

Yorkshire to find Billy Casper. We can go to the school that Barry taught at and he'll be there. Barry taught at a school, a two form entry school with 30 kids, mixed school, just 60 kids each year. We saw all the boys at the school, and those are the boys in the film. There's two lads from another school. Sign of the times, there wasn't an overweight lad at the school and so we had to go elsewhere because he'd been written. All the boys and the girls are the ones from that school year and David Bradley was in that year at that school, so he was only picked as he was one of thirty, and what an amazing stroke of luck for us that he was because, I mean, he was phenomenal really. But it didn't seem extraordinary; it just seemed like the kids at school.

The only well-known actor is Colin Welland who plays Mr Farthing. The headmaster was a teacher from another school, the other teachers are from the school where we filmed apart from the games master who became very well-known, Brian Glover, but at the time he was a wrestler at the neighbouring school and he wrestled under the name of Leon Aaron. And he would go, you know, he'd be there teaching English, he taught English, he'd be there teaching English at the school, get in his car to somewhere far distance, wrestle, come back, and next morning he'd be singing 'All Things Bright and Beautiful' in the school. And he has this other life, anyway, so I said 'why do you wrestle as Leon Arras France?' I was Leon Arras France in brackets. And he said 'you know I was doing a gig and Leon Arras didn't turn up so I had to go on twice, in a mask'.

That was the film and we did it one summer holidays, schools holidays in Barnsley and the best thing, from the kids' point of view, was the food because on the film you take a wagon and, they couldn't believe that all this food came out of this wagon, and that was the highlight, because otherwise, it was the August holidays and they were coming back to school, and it was like school and they were in the classroom and they were playing games or doing what they were doing, but the highlight was the food, and it was so much better than school dinners. That's why they did it, it was for the food, and it was a very happy experience and sometimes you work really hard on films and something in the ingredients don't add up and it doesn't turn out right and we were really quite lucky with this one and things happened to fall out in quite a happy way.

It was paid for – long story I won't go into it – but it was paid for by United Artists through Tony Richardson, the film director who had a big hit called *Tom Jones*. United Artists were so impressed by Tom Jones and all the money they made from it that they took his word and paid for *Kes*. And then they came to see it, and they saw it in the viewing theatre in Soho and of course it's in South Yorkshire with the 'e's' and the 'r's' and the lot of it, and there was a stunned silence at the end and you said 'what do you think?' to break the silence really. 'What do you think?' and the one guy said 'I guess I understand Hungarian better than that film'. So they weren't greatly enamoured, and I would have died completely but two critics spoke up for it. One who's no longer with us sadly, Nina Hibbin, who was the film critic for the *Morning Star*, a very supportive woman and a good friend and she kept writing about it, and Derek Malcolm who then wrote for *The Guardian* and he's even older than I am I think, and he wrote for it in a very supportive way.

Then it had its premiere in Doncaster, and the MP for Barnsley came along, a man called Ron Mason, who was as right-wing as you could get in those days. He was obviously bored to tears with the whole thing, and we ended up having a row about labour politics anyway. That's what I remember from the premiere, abusing Ron Mason and him shouting back. But apart from that it was okay, and it kept going really. It just kept going and it was studied at school quite a lot, and in fact it was shown so often that the word was if you misbehaved you'd have to sit through the damn film again, that was the ultimate sanction.

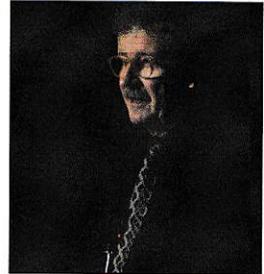
Anyway, it's still here, thanks very much for this evening by the way. It's really nice to come and brilliant to remember the great man George Lansbury, so thanks for coming and I hope you enjoy the film still, thanks very much.



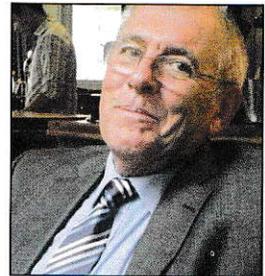
Ken Loach has enjoyed a long career directing films for television and the cinema, from *Cathy Come Home* and *Kes* in the sixties to *Land and Freedom*, *Sweet Sixteen*, *The Wind that Shakes the Barley*, *The Spirit of '45* and *Jimmy's Hall* in recent years. He is well known for his naturalistic directing style and

for his socialist politics, which are evident in the treatment of social issues in his films.

Sir Christopher Frayling is the former Chair of Arts Council England and Governor of the BFI. He was the first professor of cultural history at the Royal College of Art and became its Rector. He has also served as Chairman of the Design Council, Chairman of the Royal Mint Advisory Committee, and a Trustee of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Well known as a writer and broadcaster, he has published more than a dozen books. He was knighted for 'services to art and design education' in 2001.



Nigel Whiskin is George Lansbury's great-grandson and was awarded the MBE in 1987. After seven years as a probation officer in Bristol, he moved to the National Association for the Care and Settlement of Offenders, where he helped establish youth training and community service programmes, and later became chief executive of Crime Concern. He was instrumental in founding the UK's first victim support scheme and the first newspaper for prisoners. Nigel is a founder member of Restorative Solutions, a not-for-profit organization working to deliver Restorative Justice in England and Wales.



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