

Interview: Geoff Meggs
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Transcription: Jane Player

KN [00:00:05] Good morning, Geoff.

GM [00:00:06] Good morning.

KN [00:00:08] We'd like to start by getting some background on your early years, your family and so forth. I wonder if you could tell us when and where you were born.

GM [00:00:18] I was born in 1951 in Toronto, and I grew up in Toronto and Ottawa. I had a very comfortable upper middle-class upbringing, nothing that would forecast how I wound up in the labour movement. I wound up going to university at Toronto, University of Toronto. I graduated in 1972.

KN [00:00:36] Okay. Did you have any siblings? Were your parents at all progressive or—

GM [00:00:42] Well, I think my parents are progressive. Maybe my mother more overtly than my father. He was a senior public servant; he worked for the CBC for a long time, so he couldn't be overtly political. Later in life, she became active in the NDP when they had retired. What really got me political was the time I spent at university because it was during the period of the New Left. I got to university and the 1968 events were occurring in France. Just after I left university there was the coup in Chile. I wound up working on the student newspaper, "The Varsity" at University of Toronto, and it was linked into the Canadian University Press, and the conferences of the Canadian University Press were like an incubator for left journalists and friendships that lasted throughout a lifetime. I met, you know, legendary figures like Rod Mickleburgh during this period.

KN [00:01:36] Right. After you graduated from university—what did you take at university, by the way?

GM [00:01:45] Well, I took whatever I could in the general arts and sort of political science field. In those days, you didn't have to have a major. I wound up with what was called an Honours, B.A. I did it for four years, and I took a range of philosophy and political economy and some literature—just whatever I found interesting. If it turned out not to be interesting, I would usually drop it and pick up something else. I had a fantastic time in university and worked on the paper. I worked on the student radio station, and I got good summer jobs. In those days, summer jobs were pretty easy to find. I worked during the summer at the wire service of the Canadian Press. I did freelancing for the CBC. I did a TV job. By the time I graduated, I had a real sort of generalist education in journalism. I then wound up working for a community paper in Toronto called "The Toronto Citizen" that was very much involved in civic politics, which was another big theme in my career later, opposing the Spadina Expressway. It was published by a couple of, you know, very veteran journalists, including one who was the president of the Newspaper Guild in Toronto, which was a big organization in those days. Three big daily papers were all unionized. I did that until that paper folded and ran into financial difficulties, and there was a long set of issues around it. I then started looking around for daily newspaper work and eventually landed at "The Calgary Albertan", which was the second daily, the smaller one in Calgary, and moved to

moved to Alberta, which was something I never thought I would do, but just filled a suitcase and went out to Alberta and found a place to stay. I started working there, and the job I had there was oil and gas reporter. That was a terrific job in Calgary, although, you know, you were expected to be 110 percent in favour of the oil industry. In those days a lot of the issues that we now know about the oil industry were—people weren't aware of. I had an excellent time in that job as well, although a lot of the issues that we now know are critical were just emerging. I got to—I was able to visit the oil sands, the tar sands, before they had been opened, just as they were getting developed. They were considered extremely ambitious and unlikely success, frankly, but they were just developing that technology at that time. I also got to staff the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline inquiry by Thomas Berger. I had to arrange to fly up there. I had to do all kinds of extra copy and write all kinds of stories that were puff pieces for companies that they could run in the paper in return for getting flown up. I got to go to some very remote communities and see Berger conduct that hearing, which led to the cancellation of pipeline development in the north for a further 25 years. That was a tremendous beginning to my career, although I had to sort of fend for myself and figure stuff out, and then moved to Vancouver, where I got a job with the Canadian Press in the Vancouver bureau.

KN [00:04:54] Tell us a bit about what that was like. That was in 1974. I believe that you moved.

GM [00:04:58] Yeah, well, I didn't—I had stayed involved in politics to the degree I could, but as I arrived, of course, the Barrett government had—was about to be defeated—or had just been defeated, and I was moving, so I had no part or awareness of those activities particularly. The newspaper industry in those days was light years different from what it is now. Every small community had a daily, basically, and they had a news co-op, which was what Canadian Press was structured as, so that we received the information, all the stories from the Sun ["Vancouver Sun"] and "The Province" and elsewhere, and then rewrote them and dispatched them regularly back to those dailies. I became an editor, a news editor, and went through all of that kind of stuff and did the night shift there. It was also sent out to cover various things that were going on as the Socred government of the day began to get us off into some of the trouble that preoccupied it for the next long time. Yeah, so did the Canadian Press and then suddenly I got involved the labour movement. I'd been a member of the union—there had been an attempt to unionize "The Albertan", which failed just before I got there. There was an attempt to unionize Canadian Press and it was unionized so, of course, I became a union member there and a shop steward and had some beginning experience with the labour movement but—

KN [00:06:15] With the Newspaper Guild or?

GM [00:06:17] Yes, it was, yes, [unclear]. They called it the Wire Service Guild, but it was part of the same organization. Then I was approached to be the editor of "The Fisherman" paper, Fishermen's Union, and I'd met some of the people involved around the union through politics. I'd been interested—I'd put my toe in the water for participating COPE, the Coalition of Progressive Electors, and met some of the leaders of the civic movement who knew a lot of the people at the union. It was a small world, and they approached me to be the editor of "The Fisherman" paper, and I gladly accepted. That was how I got into the labour movement.

KN [00:06:52] That was in 1978, and you held that job for 12 years. That was a significant part of your career and certainly got you into the labour movement and into the newspaper business. Can you talk about that a bit, and tell us something about the union you were

working for and some of your experiences that you had with it then, and also the overall impact that that experience had on you?

GM [00:07:20] Well, it was a transformative experience for me personally, and I stayed there for a very long time, and it was an extraordinary opportunity to learn about the province and to get a grounding in what turned out to be crucial questions that dominate the province to this day.

GM [00:07:40] In those days, the union had about 6,000 members. Some of them were part time. They only worked during the salmon season, but we had 6,000 full time members, and the paper was coast wide. It had advertising. It had paid subscribers. It was a real newspaper. It was not a union newsletter. I don't say that disparagingly. My job was to go to interview people, break stories, cover what was going on in the industry, but above all, be credible to the wide audience that was the fishing industry, not just to the union members. We were a real newspaper, but with a point of view. There are still a number of papers in those days, including the IWA paper and a couple of others, that I would say represented the high watermark of CIO [Congress of Industrial Organizations] labour journalism—that upsurge that happened before the war and produced a whole galaxy of trade union papers that were vital, regular, you know, in-depth publications done by a professional staff. Our job at the Fishermen's Union was to provide that [unclear] kind of perspective on industry events, but also be an advocate for union staff points. The paper at that time was already—I guess it was founded when the union was firmly founded at the end of the Second World War and had some tremendous editors ahead of me. I got catapulted into the life of the union.

GM [00:09:07] I want to talk briefly about the union itself, because it was a very distinct and unusual organization, because it had been formed against all common sense and wisdom out of three different sections of the industry. The most conventional one and most familiar one would be the shore for plants, which were industrial canneries. They received all the salmon and processed them, and those workers were overwhelmingly women, Indigenous women, women of colour. They directly experienced racism in the canneries up and down the coast where there were separate facilities for Indigenous women and non-Indigenous women, that kind of thing. A very backward situation, but I would say the more of a conventional workforce and organizing circumstance. The salmon were brought to the canneries by what were called tenders or packers, and those were vessels that packed a lot of fish that went out on the ground. Sometimes quite small boats went out to meet the gillnetters and collect their fish, bring them in. They were also wage employees, and those folks who we call tendermen—we didn't have any gender neutral terminology in those days. The tender men were unionized, and they were very analogous to the collective agreements that we saw in the towboat sector where they had to be paid a daily rate, they had to be paid fees for their food or that kind of stuff. They required certain marine qualifications. Then there was the fishing fleet, which were all theoretically self-employed. The thing that was different about the Fishermen's Union was that they unionized these folks no matter what their workplace circumstances were. Some on their own boat; they delivered to a tender. They received a price per pound of fish they delivered. Others were working on larger boats called seine boats, which had large nets. They circle the fish, and they had two types of people on board. The skipper who might own the boat or might be working for the employer, which would be the canner. They had crewmen who also received a share of the catch—they were on shares, their total catch calculated at a price per pound.

GM [00:11:13] You had all of these disparate situations where each section of the union also felt correctly that they were indispensable and that if there were—if nobody caught the fish the shore workers wouldn't work and the shore workers thought, if we didn't can the fish, they'd all rot. The union had been structured to pull these folks together into a unitary organization, and so it was a diverse set of workers in that respect. Secondly, it was diverse in its makeup of its members. I mentioned the women in the plants, but we also had fishermen's locals that were completely Indigenous. So, Hartley Bay, for one, or we might have a local like Bella Coola would have some Indigenous fishers and some others. We had a Port Simpson local, which was all [unclear] fishers. We had a Prince Rupert local. Stevenson local would include a number of Japanese Canadians had only recently been re-integrated in after their expulsion during World War One, and so the union had a proud history of bringing them in. All of these disparate currents were present in the union, and we had certification for shore workers and tender men, but we had to sign up the fishermen every year.

GM [00:12:18] People often wonder why there was radicalism in the fishing industry, and we did have a lot of radicals. We had a lot of communists in the leadership. I would say that the industry conditions produced radicalism because if you worked in the industry, you had the government in terms of the Fisheries Department and canners collaborating to manipulate openings and a whole set of regulatory decisions in the interests of profit making. Well, all of these other folks, fishers, tender men, shore workers, were doing the best they could to get a living out of the resource as well, which in those days was bountiful compared to what we see today.

GM [00:12:53] For me it was being catapulted out of a pretty, I would say, conventional journalistic middle-class background into a, you know, enormous galaxy of very interesting and complex issues. I honestly wouldn't be who I am today if I hadn't been so, you know, brought in there. It was a fantastic opportunity and people sorted me out pretty quickly when I made goofy statements and I worked as hard as I could, and it turned into a really exciting and dramatic period. During that period, you know, we worked with the Native Brotherhood, which was not a union, but it was the most senior organization seeking Indigenous rights in the province, mostly based on the fishing industry. I got to go to Native Brotherhood conventions and see people like Joe Mathias and George Watts and Jimmy Gosnell speak and talk about the politics there. They still opened their conventions with "Onward Christian Soldiers", which they did during the years when they were banned, so that the missionaries would be deceived and carry on to the next place. That was the background behind it. Then I went to—we had—we went to Fed [BC Federation of Labour] conventions. I went to CLC [Canadian Labour Congress] conventions, and the union conventions were annual and lasted for six days. We would get, you know, 120 people from every part of the coast come into the Fishermen's Hall, which in those days was 138 East Cordova Street. The union had built that hall right after the war. Everything was debated. You know, Joy Thorkelson, who you may have interviewed, said to me one time, 'The fishermen's union has a policy for everything.' What that comes down to some days is there's always something that somebody can disagree with. So, if you were trying to sign somebody up, they'd say, 'Yeah, I'm not going to join the union because you have a goofy position, on such and such.' I think that fantastic commitment to grassroots connections and the fact that we had to go out on the docks every year and sign up the fishermen was part of the strength of the union but also one of the things that made it very difficult to keep it going as well.

KN [00:14:54] Okay. A significant strike occurred in the B.C. fish industry in 1989, which you have identified as the first trade war strike occurring after Canada agreed that

unprocessed salmon could be exported. Can you talk a bit about that strike, its significance, and how it played out?

GM [00:15:21] Yeah, well you've mentioned that I was at the union for 12 years, and just when I arrived (to speak briefly about the fish stocks), the salmon runs were still generally quite abundant coast wide, and there were—my first trip on the union organizing boat was to Rivers Inlet, which closed a number of years later, has never reopened, but there was significant catches everywhere. The challenge for the Fisheries Department was to, on the one hand, protect returning salmon from interception by American fishermen and high seas fleets, which gave the union seats at the table at international gatherings—another thing that was unusual in the labour movement. They had to protect the habitat which they did quite a poor job of. Logging and the impact of clearcut logging was one of the main concerns in the industry from kind of the Second World War forward, because there was clearly a lot of impact happening in salmon streams as a result of some of that, as well as urban pollution and that kind of thing.

GM [00:16:23] So, those were issues, but the annual bargaining, which was just about every year, sometimes there were two year agreements, was the really big show because you had to negotiate a price per pound of salmon. Out of that flowed the contributions to the benefit fund and so on. I think more critically is that the union's ability, based on a vote of the membership to stop fishing, was the leverage we had politically to participate in all these other forums. No one doubted the clout of the union because whatever they thought about the leadership or whatever issue was going on, they knew that when push came to shove, the membership may decide to shut the industry down. That happened on a number of occasions, but notably in 1980. Soon after I arrived, there was a big strike on herring. What we had seen for a period of time was a lot of investment by Japanese trading companies to acquire upstream supply of salmon. For the first time, there was competition on the grounds with cash for people going out on the grounds to say to fishermen, 'Never mind BC Packers, we know you're over there, they're over there. We would like to buy your fish.' They wouldn't make a long term commitment, but they did that, particularly on herring roe. There was a real boom of fish prices. They went to extraordinary—for those days—extraordinarily high levels, and it was very happy thing for everybody in the industry. Then there was a period of time where bargaining continued, but against a backdrop of DFO [Department of Fisheries and Oceans] decisions to try to reduce the number of people fishing and to increase the returns to fishermen as a solution to what they considered too many boats chasing too few fish. At both the corporate and government level, there were a series of pressures they were trying to resolve. One of them, also for DFO, was that they wanted to be able to use rivers for other purposes. There'd been a big debate about damming rivers. There have been, you know, a number of debates about mining and so on. Increasingly, DFO started looking for ways to deregulate and change the way it operated. These themes became factors of what I was covering. We kept seeing that year after year after year became deeper and deeper discussions at DFO and elsewhere in some respects to rid themselves of the pesky union, which was one of the main obstacles in their way to making alternative uses of the rivers. I started winding up covering stories about things like ocean ranching and salmon farming, which were corporate solutions to the need to get rid of wild salmon or to function in the absence of wild salmon. I can get too complicated here, but I'll just leave it at that.

GM [00:18:59] At the global political level, though, one of the other key things that you had going for it was that ever since the earliest days of the industry, it had been illegal to catch fish in Canada and deliver them to the United States. The origin of that rule was to protect the canners from the export of fish by fishermen to competitive markets. Over time it

became one of those things that stabilized the foundation of the industry. The fishermen knew that the canners had to buy it from them. They couldn't buy it from Americans or anybody else, and it couldn't be exported elsewhere. Everybody was stuck in that bargaining relationship.

GM [00:19:33] As the eighties wore on, Canada was seized by the free trade debate and the demand of the Mulroney government to go forward and complete a free trade agreement with the United States. In 1988, of course, there was the free trade election where the entire country mobilized on this battle and actually the anti-free trade forces led in a lacklustre way by John Turner lost the election and Brian Mulroney won it. We had been already facing challenges from the United States who said we were discriminating against them under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade [GATT], never mind free trade or the free trade agreement, because we wouldn't allow fish to be exported raw out of the United States, nor would we allow floating processors or canneries on them to come down from Alaska and buy straight from Canadians. The Mulroney government made it clear they were very sympathetic to this argument, and it became obvious by late eighties, but certainly '87, '88, that the fishing industry was on the chopping block when it came to this issue.

GM [00:20:39] We started making connections with Eastern Canadian unions and fighting in every way we could to protect this trade ruling. It was vital to the union's survival that fish not be exported to the United States. In 1988, the election was lost by the anti free trade forces, and immediately Canada conceded the GATT ruling to the United States.

GM [00:21:03] For the first few months of 1989, the union was involved a rearguard action to try to at least force the landing of the fish in Canada before they were exported for the purposes of counting them and making sure we understood how many fish were returning and being taken by the by the harvest. Even that was thrown away by Tom Siddon who was the Conservative Fisheries Minister and the MP for Richmond.

GM [00:21:26] As bargaining loomed, the union was confronted by a fisheries association—that was the canners—demand across all three sections for massive rollbacks, huge rollbacks of prices, major concessions to the Shore Agreement, major concessions to the Tender Agreement, even tearing up the contributions that were negotiated in the earliest days of the union to the benefit fund, which provided a bit of sickness coverage and so forth to fishermen. They tabled those demands, which were basically a gutting of the collective agreements and then refused to bargain. The fisheries association never bargained for the subsequent number of weeks that happened. The union was confronted with something then I don't think too many unions are faced with, that we were the first union by no means the last, but probably the most stark example of the free trade agreement coming home to roost in a profound way that just completely undercut collective bargaining in the fishing industry. It would take probably too long in this conversation to talk about all the things that happened during that period of time, the next few weeks. But [unclear] the canners never did bargain, and the strike that was conducted by the union went on for 17 days, which is an enormous length of time for a salmon strike. I mean, normally a salmon strike lasts three or four days, because once the fish have gone by, there's nothing left to fight about.

GM [00:22:49] I was dispatched to North Vancouver Island, where the seine fleet was fishing. It had always been a highly unionized fleet. A small group of little packers were trying to operate non-union. When I got to Port Hardy and went down to the harbour to meet the boat, there was huge melee going on in the harbour as union fishermen put their

boats in the way of packers that were trying to deliver to a little scab plant there. Boats getting rammed, people hurling abuse at each other and so on. The guy got turned away on that occasion. Who knows what happened the next time.

GM [00:23:23] There were reefer trucks moving up and down the island and trying to go to obscure docks. The moving and inspiring part of it was how quickly the membership themselves created flying pickets. They would go to backwater docks, and you name it, to picket all over the place, interfering with this effort to break the strike.

GM [00:23:43] The salmon were running in from the North Pacific to the north end of Vancouver Island, and the whole seine fleet was off the north end of Vancouver Island at an area called Roller Bay. It was very difficult for us to tell what was going on. The Native Brotherhood had taken a strike vote, but their vote had only been 60 percent. We were concerned that there might be some weakness on that front. I remember being in a chartered plane with some fishermen. We chartered a plane in Port Hardy to fly out over the grounds and see what was going on. It was a lot of radio chatter, but impossible to tell what was happening. These fishermen I was with could recognize and identify a boat from two miles just by its profile and so on.

GM [00:24:24] For the first time since the Second World War, a significant chunk of the seine fleet had started fishing. You know, confronted with two or three boats fishing and loading up, it was proved to be very, very difficult to stop some of the others from breaking. You can't really picket out on the grounds except in a symbolic way. This was like a strategic change. It was very, very sad to see that and discouraging.

GM [00:24:50] I continued working until the union reassigned me back to Vancouver. The situation in Vancouver was very different because the shore workers were on strike there and they were picketing and so seemed very quiet in Vancouver. To the bargaining committee in town, it seemed like a conventional strike where things were kind of going okay because they couldn't see what we had seen in the North Island. You know, pretty stormy debates ensued inside the union about what to do in these unprecedented circumstances. Then a second factor came into play, which was the Vander Zalm government's dramatic overhaul in a negative way of the labour law. Picketing was very profoundly affected by the introduction of the Industrial Relations Council and regressive changes to the Labour Code.

GM [00:25:35] Both the problems of the free trade agreement, add in this Labour Code problem we had underline the importance of political action. If anybody ever wants sort of a clinic in how political action or political changes can impact the life of your union, you should take a look at this story because both at the international level and the provincial level, it was devastating. The shore workers, who were being undermined by the export of fish as well, seeing their work go to non-union plants in the United States, we weren't sure exactly how or were limited in their picketing. The defeat at the provincial political level had profound consequences there, too. Notwithstanding all of those huge problems, the shore workers remained solid. So did the tender men. Eventually, the union convinced the government to appoint Vince Ready as an industrial inquiry commissioner, and he wrote us an agreement. The fisheries association never did negotiate, which minimized the concessions, although there were serious concessions made, and actually provided a small new benefit for shore workers in terms of a pension fund, which is something they'd been looking for a long time, because he needed to kind of, I think, balance the books a little bit. Bargaining in the fishing industry never, ever happened again in the old way, and the strength of the union was drastically undercut.

GM [00:27:06] Recently, I got to reconnect with the union as it is today, and it was a really heartening and inspiring story. It's a much smaller organization. There's very little collective bargaining, although there's a bit. They've sheltered. They've been given tremendous support over the years by UNIFOR and before that the CAW. The president is a 35-year-old Indigenous leader, a very charismatic guy who fishes most of the time. If you want to talk to him, you've got to kind of book an appointment when he's close to shore. They really struggle hard on a number of fronts. It's an inspiring thing, but it's light years away from where it was when I was there in 1990. So, from the standpoint of my time with it, that was the beginning of my time in the labour movement. I had lots of other adventures, but it will stick in my mind as one of the most important events, frankly, for the labour movement in B.C. because in their changed circumstances, the canners made a decision to break the union and they weren't successful, but the union was never the same. We had fantastic leadership and fantastic solidarity.

GM [00:28:13] There were moments that I'll never forget were—especially at the border. I should have mentioned this earlier that I got back to town and they said, we need to do something to dramatize the export of fish. They directed me—I don't know how they thought I was going to do it—to shut the border. Against the current backdrop of the convoy and so forth, we know that border shutting is a high risk activity; it's not something you should do as a routine kind of thing. I wasn't even sure how to do it or what would be involved, but we phoned the picket committee, and as is so often the case, they don't need staff to figure this stuff out. They know on their own. By the time I got to the King George border crossing the next morning, there were pickets there from the union, including longshore workers, a lot of South Asian women who had linked arms. The lineup of trucks to the United States stretched back a couple of miles. There were all kinds of tourists there. It was a crazy scene, and our pickets were going from truck to truck challenging these truckers to prove that they did not have fish on board, (laughter) which in itself is kind of risky when you think about it. Anyway, most of them were very sympathetic to the idea that people's jobs were at stake. A whole bunch of Mounties showed up and tried to arrest the shore workers. When the fishermen heard that there were some arrests happening and some of the shore workers were being put into squad cars, they came rushing back. A picket captain who I'd never met before and never met again—he was very good though—asked the Mounties to negotiate and got agreement that they would release the women from the cars in return for a photo op for Global that proved that there was raw fish there. They'd spotted a truck with a lot of slime and water flowing out the back gate. They got the trucker to open the back gate on the understanding he'd get to go afterwards. It was full of totes with B.C. Packers logos on the side and raw fish piled up in them. It was literally their jobs going across the border to a non-union plant, and it led the news. Having got that picture, they let the border reopen. That was the kind of spontaneous resistance that occurred, I mean, and partly contributed to the settlement that came. I've had many big experiences; that's one that I'll never forget.

KN [00:30:43] Fascinating story. As you indicated, you left working for the Fishermen's Union shortly thereafter and ended up with the Hospital Employees' Union. How did that happen?

GM [00:31:01] Well, they phoned up and asked me to come and work for them (laughter). Of course that complicated—there'd been a lot of—

KN [00:31:07] Within communications?

GM [00:31:08] Yeah, that's right. There'd been a lot of turmoil in the health sector during that period. In collective bargaining—we had an NDP government by that time provincially because we're talking now after 1990 when Mike Harcourt got elected—and there'd been important changes in the Labour code that rectified some of the problems we faced in 1989 in the fishing industry. In the union side, there was pent up demand for improvements on a lot of fronts and the nurses had had a big strike I think in 1989, but the gains they achieved had not flowed through to the HEU [Hospital Employees' Union], which led to a big upheaval of the leadership of the HEU for a set of reasons. The new leadership approached me and asked me to come and be the communications director. The new leader of the HEU, the secretary-business manager, which is sort of the most important operational position, (the president was Bill McDonald), but Carmella Allevato was the secretary-business manager. She hired me as part of a new team, and we began preparing for bargaining ourselves in the subsequent agreement, which was going to come a couple of years later.

GM [00:32:14] The key thing I remember about that period is the battle that ensued with the NDP over a set of issues for HEU that had been pent up for a long time. What they came down to really was a sense of respect in the health care sector. HEU members are everybody who's not a nurse or a paramedical professional, basically, so the cleaners, the dietary workers, many technicians, orderlies. Many of those jobs—all of those jobs basically in those days were performed by HEU members and also in long term care. In those days, they also represented licensed practical nurses. So, the less professional but still critical sector, the health care industry, the health care sector was represented by HEU and particularly in the hospital sector. There'd been a lot of frustration over the larger gains achieved by the nurses and a set of other pent up problems, including pay equity. There was a problem inside the HEU's own membership where it was clear that people who had a ticket like plumbers, steam fitters and so forth, painters, overwhelmingly men they were paid, you know, enormously more, (not too much) but consistent with construction trades and salaried workers. It was a real bone of contention.

GM [00:33:35] A series of events came together there that led to a really important breakthrough that still reverberates in my view. That was a problem that we got into with the New Democratic Government and was solved with the New Democratic Government, which is an important point to keep in mind through the whole conversation. The government had decided to start to change and make shifts in health care delivery that were important in terms of reducing the emphasis on acute care treatment and move increasingly towards community care. This was not a new idea, but it was something they wanted to pursue. What had been problematic about it in previous versions under the Social Credit was that it tended to be the movement to group homes where many people criticized it for providing a lower quality of care, but certainly a lower classification of worker providing the care. That would again require a whole other program to debate, but I think the HEU had refrained for mistaken reasons from organizing in that sector. That sector was overwhelmingly represented by the B.C. Government Employees' Union [BCGEU, now BC General Employees' Union] who saw an opportunity to represent those workers and took it and have done a great job there, not because HEU was trying to and they overcame them, they just—HEU had decided not to take up that field. It was focusing on long term care.

GM [00:34:54] When the dispute was looming, the government had decided at that point not to pursue some of the improvements that the HEU wanted, which were undoubtedly going to be expensive. The union did two things that I think were new. One was that it went from very much a top down approach that had been the case in the past because of

their—for a long time, they had no right to strike. They had relied on binding arbitration, and there was no mobilization required for that, just a bunch of staff people with binders, right. Now the workers would have an opportunity to strike; the laws obviously had to be used very carefully. They had some issues that were really under their—a burr under their saddle, including pay equity. There also was a curtain raiser which irritated them a lot, the membership, that is, because in the move to community care the government had decided not wrongly, but it was executed not beautifully, to reduce their number of acute care hospitals, particularly Shaughnessy Hospital. You know, if you know Vancouver at all there's Shaughnessy Hospital, VGH [Vancouver General Hospital], Mount Saint Joe's, Mount St Vincent's, a number of acute care facilities all in a very small cluster. The government thought they could do without Shaughnessy Hospital and especially their emergency ward. A big fight back emerged against the government that was political on that front, that got the members roused and we wound up on strike against the NDP, using a tactic that the members evolved at a series of conferences, which was a fascinating process to see as well. We didn't have essential services, but we had the right to strike. We didn't have good unity with the nurses, and so we couldn't count on them to be comfortable honouring picket lines. Nor could we be sure that picket lines were ever a good idea in a hospital setting when people were trying to get in and access emergency care.

GM [00:36:47] What the membership evolved in the course of a series of conferences was the idea of rotating strikes by department, which under the new anti scab law, would then be staffed by employers. This rotating strike proved fantastically effective because there was no bar to patients coming in accessing anything, and there was never any impact on emergency directly. It affected dietary departments and cleaning, and employers are required under the anti scab law to backfill those positions. So really, service didn't decline, and there were no picket lines required for the BCNU [British Columbia Nurses Union] or others to honour. We didn't have to worry about the Fed picket policy and how that would all be managed, which was a huge headache in later years. Very quickly the management got exhausted of all the cleaning and the dietary work that happened, and they would never know from one day to the next which department to backfill. After a short period of time, the employers—I have only heard anecdotes about the political conversations—but at the employer level, they were done. These were people who had been used to binding arbitration and conducting an air war of, you know, messages about why they couldn't afford to pay more, who now were suddenly under the law required to provide dietary services, and cleaning, and so on. After a week or two, it wore very thin, and the government tried to fly some kids who needed—it purported, said there was a problem in surgery, said there was difficulties in various parts of the system. We said we're not sure why, because they're required to provide the backup services and dietary and we haven't picketed anything. A solution was found through an employment security agreement, and the dispute was settled, and it was significantly in the union's favour. There was a lot of pay equity improvements made, significant wage improvements made, but most critically, over a period of months with all of the health care unions, the union—the government negotiated an employment security agreement which provided a structure for the movement of services from acute care to the community while protecting people's employment. It didn't protect your—you might have a different job, but you would get to move with significant seniority and other protections to other employment. Although it was a rough and ready process that had lots of bumps along the road [unclear] I think it continues to be one of those really important achievements where a government that fundamentally shared the values of the unions sat down and said, 'What if we do it this way?' And, you know, they did. It was a big deal, and it was one of the key things that the

Gordon Campbell government was determined to explode as soon as they got back in in 2001.

KN [00:39:30] Okay. You're with the Hospital Employees' Union in a key position. Carmella Allevato, who you identified as the secretary-business manager of the HEU, a key leadership position in the organization, decided that she would step down. You applied for a job which was the top job at the HEU, and you were unsuccessful, so you soon left the HEU to take employment working for the new NDP premier, Glen Clark. You did that for a number of years in the communications area and also in the advisory area, I imagine. Can you talk about that period of time and some of the experiences you had?

GM [00:40:19] My failure to get the top job was one of the best things that ever happened to me. (laughter) I would just want to acknowledge my gratitude to the HEU, the executive over there [unclear] in that regard, because soon after I did get invited to come to work for the premier's office, and I had no idea what I was getting into. I will say too that I think that was another extremely fortunate turn in my career because although I'd been invited to come and work as communications director for government under the Harcourt administration, I had decided not to and stayed at the HEU. The HEU's communications department at that time, was the biggest in the labour movement in Western Canada, I'm sure, and it was competitive with some of the ones, you know, for national unions. I thought I knew quite a bit about this line of work, but when I got to Victoria, I realized I had—I was a complete—I barely came up to the ankle of the knowledge that I needed to have to function in that environment.

GM [00:41:21] I think what people need to remember about that government was that it compares interestingly to the Horgan government. In the Horgan government, it was a minority government with three seats held by the Green Party, and we had a confidence and supply agreement. The Clark government's mandate was equally tenuous. He actually lost the popular vote but won a majority, and it was about a three vote majority. Although we didn't have a confidence and supply agreement to wrestle with, there was great caucus discipline through that whole period. You know, if one of the members from the Kootenays needed a liver transplant, which he did—Conroy, Ed Conroy—we were all very vigilant to make sure that nobody missed the house and that kind of thing. It also had been kind of—because the NDP had been in crisis and in retrospect, it's hard to imagine that that these events precipitated the crisis they did. Mike Harcourt had to resign, and the events surrounding that meant that when Glen Clark won the leadership, it was a mad rush to the election. It was always unclear how that would turn out. Glen pulled off a win very narrowly by polarising, by being on your side, and by mobilizing and driving forward our vote. But he didn't—he wasn't able to grow it, and that was the sign—the sign of that was in the narrow majority.

GM [00:42:47] I think one of the mistakes that we collectively made was that we acted like we had a majority, and certainly John Horgan never made that mistake because we could see where it was. We could see the structure necessary. You know, Glen might disagree with me, but I think that we were—we took rash steps in a number of cases that exposed us to attack. A lot of good work was done in a lot of ways. I think that that narrowness of awareness is one piece to consider.

GM [00:43:26] The second piece for people to think about is that our opponents never relented for one second, and they remained completely united in their determination to shake the NDP out of power and worked at that night and day with considerable support from the media. I can hear reporters out there going, 'Oh no, we were always fair' and so

forth. Yeah, well, we could debate it in our rocking chairs in the long term care home. My job turned out to be facing a withering media onslaught day after day after day. Did we give did we give reason for that? Some days, yes, we did, but the coordination and the concentration of media was something that would be hard to feature today. It's a very different media landscape today. In those days, Global as it is today, but who watches TV anymore. Global was totally dominant in the television news market. CKNW was totally dominant in open line shows in the morning and The Sun in The Province were totally dominant in the print media. If four reporters in the press gallery formed the same view about you, you had a huge battle to overcome those perceptions. If they decided something was a story, they made it a story, and they kept on going until till you woke up to your plight and surrendered. That was a very difficult time to govern.

GM [00:45:00] I think that there's a lot to be said and explored about that whole period. I would say the labour movement was very loyal, although there were some real tensions between—when I say loyal, I don't mean mindlessly loyal. I think that the labour movement has always been very committed to the success of social democratic government, but early on, particularly because of our budget issues, the B.C. Government Employees' Union became very frustrated with the government over layoffs that had to happen in the public service. The IWA [International Woodworkers of America], another major affiliate, became very frustrated by the problems with forest renewal. It became extremely difficult for them to mobilize their members in support of the government when they felt that they had been, you know, had important issues— important implicit commitments betrayed by the government as part of its management as it came in. We worked hard to try to keep those lines open, but it was hard to do. There were changes made to the Labour Code. They were not welcome in some respects—efforts to make headway. I learned a lot of lessons about how to do things differently and better, but I wasn't able to apply them at that time. I wouldn't have missed any minute of that, although it was really hard. Anybody who was there knows it was a tough time, but it was it was still, you know, invaluable, and I made lifelong friendships out of it. I got an insight into how B.C. works that I never would have got any other way. I referenced this a bit earlier in the fishing strike. In the fishermen's—in the salmon industry, you could not miss the close alliance between the corporate sector and the government sector. You saw the wheels turning to crush you, so you didn't have to go out on the docks and say to people, 'You know, these canners aren't everybody. They aren't the nicest people in the world.' Everybody started from there. In the broader labour movement, the wheels and the levers and the private conversations are not so obvious, but when you get into government, you can start to see them. And we did see them. You know, we saw the resistance and the challenges that would come on a number of points. For me, I got an idea of how B.C. works in a way that I would never have got from a different location. That's not to say everybody in business is evil or that all reporters are hacks by any means. That's not what I learned. I learned that the labour view that there's us and them is true (laughter), and it has consequences, and it has consequences every day. You need to be alive to that if you're going to have any chance of success.

GM [00:47:51] The main thing I'm proud of in that period had nothing to do with the labour movement, but it was the Nisga'a Treaty, the first modern treaty. You know, when you make a list of what we were able to do, there were a lot of important small things. That was a huge thing—so huge that the incoming Liberal government conducted a referendum to try to roll it back, and it became a whole of government movement. And although there haven't been very many treaties since that, (and there's a whole set of reasons behind that), it was a really proud moment. There was a huge delegation of Nisga'a chiefs and elders who came to the legislature. The treaty was ratified, and, you know, I think it was an important high watermark for that administration and for B.C. Although that whole

reconciliation train has gone in a different direction, I don't think it would have got anywhere without the Nisga'a and that treaty.

KN [00:48:46] The next experience I'd like you to talk about, Geoff, is your work at the B.C. Federation of Labour. You were essentially in the chief staff position, I believe, at the time and you were there for a number of years, a few years in the early 2000s when the stuff—the Gordon Campbell government had been elected. What was happening with the B.C. Fed during this period of time, what particularly were you focusing on?

GM [00:49:11] Well, after leaving the B.C. government, which I did in '99, 1999, I did various things, consulting, and other work. In 2001, there had been a change of leadership at the B.C. Federation of Labour. Ken Georgetti had become president of the CLC [Canadian Labour Congress], and Jim Sinclair became president of the B.C. Federation of Labour. I had worked with Jim the Fishermen's Union, and he asked me to come and work with him at the Fed. I went there just as the Campbell government was coming into power. They, of course, had completely devastated the NDP, and only Joy MacPhail and Jenny Kwan had been elected to the legislature.

GM [00:49:55] There's a whirl of events, but I can remember Jim working closely with the Vancouver bus drivers who were members of what was then the CAW [Canadian Autoworkers], and they'd wound up on strike against Translink. The strike had begun really during the campaign and continued for quite a while. Our first crisis was that—was how to end this dispute. The head of Translink was George Puil who was a dyed in the wool conservative and utterly indifferent to the plight of commuters. Gordon Campbell, I think, was often underestimated on the left in B.C. He knew it was a problem. He'd been the mayor of Vancouver and head of Metro and so on, but how to how to fix this was the question mark. The attitude of the incoming B.C. Liberals was ruthless to the NDP. They denied them opposition status, and you'll recall the same issue came up when the Greens only got three members and they did. They were granted opposition status, even though they didn't quite meet the bar—that kind of thing. They took every opportunity they had to maximize the impact on the NDP politically. Jenny and Joy were there all by themselves and eventually the Campbell government decided to legislate the bus drivers back to work. This was the first labour political crisis of the new era, (laughter) and Jim knew the bus drivers well because the Fishermen's Union had formed a relationship with the CAW so the question was what could be done politically about that? Objectively, you have to assume most bus drivers had not voted for the NDP because many fewer people had. Certainly, the union were not noticeably, just like everybody else, championing the NDP and that vote that wound up with such a bad outcome. Jim convinced them to go to Victoria to watch the legislation, to protest it and demonstrate against it. We went over and they brought in the bill, and we went to the legislative dining room to meet with Joy and Jenny and the executive, and it was an uncomfortable moment I feel—maybe the drivers there would not feel that way. They were uncomfortable around Joy and Jenny. I remember Joy, who had been declared leader, saying, 'You know, we'll do whatever you want. We'll filibuster this till we fall over, or we'll filibuster to midnight. You tell us.' They said, 'Well, we should go, you know, for a period of time.' So they went back into the house. The drivers went up and watched. It was just brutal how the Liberals treated Joy McPhail and Jenny Quan, and the story needs to be written sometime. The direct personal abuse they faced, the mockery, the misogynistic, you know, shouts. Joy and Jenny just kept going. I felt (and maybe I was reading too much into it) that over the course of the evening, the drivers began to shift gears literally about how they felt about the NDP. There was a break at some point and Joy said, 'Well', and she put to them again, 'How far do you want to go?' They said, 'You've done enough.' It was very tough to sit in the gallery and

see what those two women were going through. Yet, I think if you were in the filibuster, you'd think, 'Boy, we could use a few more of those people.'

GM [00:53:45] That was the beginning of, you know, a very difficult and chaotic period for the labour movement and a lot of debates about what should happen, what could happen, what could be done. I think the Fed itself was heading into a somewhat different period than in the past, not just because of the political context, but because we were in a period of increasing consolidation among the affiliates who were getting—so, we had fewer affiliates that were bigger, that had more capacity to do stuff on their own. Part of the debate over those years was what the fence wall could or should be in the face of that. In the first few years that I got to know the Fed when I was at the Fishermen's Union—the Fishermen's Union was not that atypical affiliate. As a standalone member of the Fed with 6,000 members, that's pretty small, but there were many at 15 and 20,000, right? By ten years later, or 15 years later, the smaller affiliates were much rarer and CUPE was absorbing VMREU [Vancouver Municipal Employees' Union] and then the Compensation Employees' Union, and so on. Not absorbing in a bad way, but making them larger, making them stronger. Those affiliates being bigger at the Fed table had a different dynamic at the Fed. I think if you talk to Jim and you talk to Angie, Angie Shira who was the secretary-treasurer and others, they will talk about that shift and the impact it had on how the Fed confronted events going forward. It was a tricky time and for a lot of affiliates who were very much in a defensive mode, they needed the Fed to speak out on questions like WorkSafe and employment standards, pensions, child care, which they cared about, but they were mostly concerned about trying to protect themselves from being overrun. That's how it felt to many of them. It was a tricky, interesting period, but I left after to go back to civic politics.

KN [00:55:38] Okay, well, let's talk about that. You did leave that after a couple of years to go and work for Larry Campbell, who had been elected in the fall of 2002 with a COPE majority on council. You went up and worked in the mayor's office for the next three years. Can you talk about that, some of the highlights of that experience?

GM [00:56:00] Yeah, there was a rout of the progressive—COPE had always had a few seats on council. In an earlier campaign, Philip Owen wiped out everybody at every level. This is the Non-Partisan Association [NPA], a conservative interest in the city won every seat. In some respects that was a curtain raiser for what nearly happened provincially. In my view, neither route was necessary. (laughter) It's not to say I would have been a wizard who could've figured out how to avoid them, but I do think that these events are not inevitable, and we really needed to re-establish a progressive presence in the city of Vancouver for a whole set of reasons, not least to start to create some opposition to the provincial government. So, a group of people got together. There were a number of people from the labour movement and others and started working on getting COPE back in. In the previous election, they elected Tim Louis and Fred Bass to council and a couple of other people, so there was a bit of a base there.

GM [00:57:09] It was clear by 2002 that Philip Owen was struggling to maintain his control over the issue of overdoses actually, and the four pillars policy. It was the downtown east side, the same issue that bedevils us today. Owen had decided to embrace what was called the four pillars strategy, which was a Harvard action approach, and that split his caucus. The COPE councilors—Fred Bass was an addiction specialist. He made his name in fighting and working on tobacco addiction and so on, decided to support Philip Owen because they thought it was the right policy, but also as a valuable side effect, it split his caucus. We're not talking about city politics, today, but that opened the door to new

possibilities at the council level that we hadn't experienced before. There was huge interest in changing council and a broad conference was called Think City. That brought in a lot of people. Jim Green was interested in working on it. He was well known in the labour movement and had run before for mayor, but Larry Campbell cropped up as well, and he had been the coroner. He'd been very much supportive of Philip Owen during the four pillars strategy. After a whole set of developments, a really strong team was put together with Larry at the head of it to run for council. It really caught a wave, and we elected, as I recall, everybody that we nominated. We didn't run for every position, so it wasn't a complete sweep, but we won at every level of government civically—mayor, council, school board, park board. On election night, Larry asked me if I would come to work for him, and I agreed to do that. It all happened in a period of weeks. A very interesting, a very interesting period. A lot of great changes occurred during that time as well, particularly, I would say, a re-establishment or a consolidation of what it always been a pretty good relationship with the labour movement. Certainly, for me and a number of the other people there, the relationship with the labour movement and the unions of the city was paramount. I spent a lot of time with the firefighters. I got to know the Police Union a little bit. I got to spend a lot of time, of course, with CUPE 1004 or CUPE 15, and we worked on a lot of issues together at that time, the library workers. That administration changed conditions a lot for workers on the ground, but also, I think they made a whole bunch of other improvements. For one thing, opening the library on the weekends—it was closed—you know, adding to public service, creating jobs.

KN [01:00:07] You went back to work at the Fed. Why did that happen?

GM [01:00:10] Well, we tried to get Jim Green elected mayor, and he got defeated by dirty tricks, in my view. The strangest thing that a guy that who been around town, a fellow named, James Green, suddenly got interested in civic politics and put his name on the ballot. Jim lost by 33,000 votes. This guy got 5,000 or something. So, were that many people confused? I think so because his name was right before Jim's on the ballot. Yeah, that's a story for another day. Maybe Sam Sullivan can tell it—explain that one to you. Yeah, so after Jim was defeated—

KN [01:00:52] By Sam Sullivan.

GM [01:00:54] By Sam Sullivan. Jim Sinclair asked me to come back, and I went back to the Fed again, which was an honour to do. The issues were of a different quality, of course by then, because we're talking 2008-9. The question was whether the NDP could get off the mat and get re-elected to government. I would just say the defeat in 2001 was followed by a 2005 election, which many New Democrats feel in retrospect could have been won by Carole James. Part of the problem that we face in political action in the labour movement, in my opinion, is we undervalue ourselves. You know, and I heard after the 2000 election, 2005 election, 'Well, it's just as well. We weren't ready to govern. We needed more time.' You know, just don't say that stuff to me. If that's how you feel, just keep it to yourself and go and work on something else. The needs of working people are so enormous that we can't trifle with these elections. We have to go to win every time, and that requires tough discussions. The losses that we face—like I look back on the fisherman's story I started with—like, they're staggering, and they go on for generations. When people lose their jobs like that and can never go out again, I mean, that has an impact on their kids and their grandkids. It's critical that we really take this stuff seriously. Not at all costs [unclear] you know, I know what I'm talking about. The 2005, 2009, it was partly due to a defeatist mentality.

GM [01:02:37] The critical thing that I learned about the labour movement was that the most successful people I think in terms of leadership are often the ones who have not bought the idea that people in power are there because they're smarter. They're not smarter. They just were born to it or something. They may not be evil people, but too often in the labour movement there's—we're too deferential to folks in power and think that they know something we don't, and they may have some data we don't, but they're not smarter, if you know what I'm getting at. I think we lost a lot of time. I think there were a number of occasions over the intervening years where it didn't have to be '16. It might have been '12, or it could even have been '07, who knows. So, when I got back to the Fed, the issue of political action was much more on the agenda because the costs that the labour movement of working people had paid and are continuing to pay for the Campbell administration were really high. I mean, if you just take the HEU as one example and the ripping up of their agreements, what happened to the teachers, the ten years and millions of millions of dollars spent by both organizations to achieve the court victories, they finally did. Those are really bruising and obvious losses, but there were terrible losses in other areas too, in terms of privatization and contracting out.

GM [01:04:02] Those are real material losses that people suffered because we weren't able to put together a good political strategy. By the time I got back to the Fed, people were cheering up a bit and thinking we could do this. Not only could we do it, but we had to do it. Like what was the alternative? I think the civic victories and the change at the civic level, and there was the Columbia Institute, but, you know, it wasn't just in Vancouver. There was good work done in many places to start electing labour friendly candidates to Labour Council, progressives in a number of other areas, who were not necessarily from labour but were supportive of labour. In many cases became the MLAs of the future Horgan administration and leaders in other areas. I would say by the time I got back, people were starting to stitch themselves back together and look for what could be done. There was good unity in the labour movement and a lot of efforts being made, but a lot of disappointments came electorally, of course.

KN [01:05:10] During this period of time you kept your foot, I guess you'd say, in civic politics, and you were a key person that was involved in organizing a new political party, a civic party in Vancouver called Vision, which ended up being a very successful political party. You ran for council for this party and were elected and remained in office until you stepped down in 2017. Can you tell us a bit about that whole experience of forming Vision and what was involved in doing that and what were the dynamics of that, etcetera?

GM [01:05:49] Yeah, well, that was one of, another—none of these things come easily right off the shelf, but when Larry got elected, there was—it became obvious right away that there was a big division in COPE over what the meaning of that election victory was and how it should be exploited. The COPE majority became divided quite early on. Then eventually Larry decided to resign, and he resigned to take a Senate appointment quite close to the 2005 elections. After a fair amount of soul searching, we decided among a group of us, including some of the incumbents like Jim and Raymond Louie, Tim Stevenson, and so on, to form a new political party civically that reflected what they had been saying during the previous couple of years on council. That was a big decision and one that caused a lot of heartache and frustration and anger, frankly, in a lot of quarters. Jim's campaign was handicapped, of course, by the controversies around that, but he ran as the first Vision candidate. Although he was defeated, we elected the other council candidates. There was a core of—with one exception—so there was a core of people on council who were very strong. So, Heather Deal, Tim Stevenson, Raymond Louie, George Chow, who became the nucleus of Vision going forward. We worked hard to put support

around them. COPE had elected—can't remember if it was one or two people. There was some collaboration, but I think they elected one, David Cadman. There were five progressive candidates: four Vision and one of COPE. The idea was to go forward at the next campaign to try to run a stronger, Vision group, which is what happened. Gregor Robertson had been an NDP MLA in Fairview, and he resigned to seek the mayor's chair, and he won the nomination over Raymond Louie, who had a long standing labour background with CEP. He worked at Pacific Press for the mailers, in the mailers section. We really caught a wave that time again. Sadly, but important to note, the only person who did not get elected was Kashmir Dhaliwal, our South Asian candidate for council. There's a view in the South Asian community, which is hard to refute, that Vancouver voters will not support South Asian candidates. There's only very few exceptions to that rule. Setty Pandakur got elected with TEAM [The Electors' Action Movement] way back in the day. In spite of our large South Asian community, this—I don't think except for Setty not elected to council. .

GM [01:08:44] I had decided to stop being—I decided to put my name forward because I thought well if I've been giving this advice for a long time, maybe I should start acting on my own advice. I sought the nomination and that was not handed to me. (laughter) I have to say, yeah, it was a real nomination fight, but I did very well, and I really got a lot of support from the labour movement on that occasion and later. My relationship with the labour movement was pivotal to my success in civic politics because there were a number of occasions where I asked people to support me and they did, and they asked their members to support me and I think it made all the difference overall. I certainly got elected feeling that I was not alone by any means because Raymond had been active in the labour movement, Tim Stevenson had always been a union member. So, there were—but I was the one who had the most labour experience in terms of sort of being close to leadership, although not an elected leader. I worked closely with the union movement all the way through. In fact, the biggest trouble I got into a council was in my last election bid was because I made a commitment to the labour movement with the full backing of the mayor, that we would continue our policy of no privatization and no contracting out—no more contracting or no more privatization. I was taped by somebody in this meeting, and it was provided to the NPA who accused me of corruption and vote buying, but I won a court decision that I was—that it was not the case. It was, but it did damage me severely. They did attack ads on me because of my relationship to the labour movement and portrayed that relationship as corrupt. It was just another lesson if I needed one then that these are real distinctions you can never lose sight of. I was able to get across the line that time with the direct support of a whole bunch of unions who made sure their members voted for me, even if they didn't vote for anybody else. I'm absolutely certain that's the only way I got in the last time.

KN [01:10:55] Can you talk a bit, Geoff, about being an elected person as opposed to being a staff person in terms of how you adjusted to those roles and what you thought about that?

GM [01:11:09] Well, I was—I loved being elected, it wasn't like I wasn't part of a caucus and part of a collective group. Like the Vision Caucus had a very strong, disciplined culture of engagement. It's not to say we didn't have big fights. We did, but we, I think, evolved an internal dynamic that was very constructive and managed those differences in a good way. I really valued that, but what I really enjoyed about being elected was that I got catapulted into every part of the city and exposed to issues and people I would never have met under any other circumstances. You know, that's one of the great privileges of being elected. If you like people and you can get to know them that you would just never be exposed to,

even in the labour movement. I was able to visit the, you know, the wonderful old meeting rooms, the clan associations in Chinatown, or [unclear] people at the two big gurdwaras here in Vancouver and have made friendships there and learned how miserable it is to be a taxi driver and tried to advocate for taxi drivers. You know, I could go on and on and on and say it's a fantastic opportunity. You're spending a lot of time with people in the community. Wherever you go, you meet people that you probably met in labour or work, but you meet them from a different perspective. You know, you'd meet all kinds of HEU members when I was going to Filipino community meetings and that kind of thing, but then I'd meet their families and hear about the rest of their stories and understand more about what the Philippine experience had been here and what it was turning into. So on, and so on it went. I had a great time with it.

KN [01:13:04] In 2017, the new premier, John Horgan, called you to come and see if you'd be willing to serve as his chief of staff, which you did do, or I believe, five years until he stepped down in 2022. Is there anything you'd like to say about that period of time?

GM [01:13:26] Well, it was not something that was any kind of plan. I thought I would finish out my term and retire, but the election was so close and so hard fought that, of course, I wanted to do anything I could, so I was really honoured to be invited to do it. In many respects, it was it was a good time for me because I had nothing—you know, the kids were grown up—I could dedicate myself to it. I had I found all of this other experience we've talked about, which I thought could be valuable to the new government. When you resign at city hall you have to leave your office by the end of the day. I thought maybe I could take a leave or something to spare them a by election, but that wasn't on, so it was quite a jolt. I got called in the morning. I resigned about 11:00. I left my keys at the desk at five, and I've never set back at city hall on that floor again. I've never gone back until I went to charge my car there a few months ago. It was a jolt, but a good jolt, and I would say that over the two elections, 2017 and 2020, John was very effective in showing people that we could govern effectively. If there's one legacy that I would take away from that is that he raised the confidence of working people generally that we can take power and govern the province very well. A lot of the myths that we've accepted from our detractors are just that. They're myths and we should let them go. Get rid of them because the government, you know, provided by John and now David Eby is, I think, exceptionally solid. You would expect me to say that, but everywhere I go, people say, you know, I never voted NDP, but I really like John Horgan, which is a statement of trust and confidence. It's not like just I'd like to have a beer with him, although they might. I think it speaks to the quality of the government which he made into a team project. The other thing that was so great about—is so great about the government is the strength of the front and back bench and the diversity that's there. The years in the wilderness were hard but well spent and there's a certain extremely capable group of people there, you know, two generations. There's a generation that started in 2005, 2009. Not too many 2005 people left but a few 2009 people left, and then a whole bunch of 2017 and 2020 people who are enormously talented. [unclear] there's great opportunities ahead, but the problems are very daunting, so I'm glad they're there.

KN [01:16:15] Geoff, you've authored three books, and I'm gonna just ask you to maybe say a few words about each one of them. The first one that you wrote was *Salmon: The Decline of the B.C. Fishery*, a fairly dramatic title. Can you tell us a bit about that book and what prompted you to write it?

GM [01:16:33] Well, I was still at the union and BC Packers put out—they were the big canner—they put out an annual report summarizing the year and in I think it was 1980,

1983 or so their annual report said, 'We've been through three big crises in the history of our firm, 1900, 1928 and 1968 and emerge stronger each time. And we're on one of those turning points again.' I had never heard anyone say, you know, especially on the corporate side, 'We went through the fire in 1900 and we got bigger.' [unclear] went through the fire [unclear] I didn't know what had happened in 1928. I didn't know what had happened in—I had a vague idea about 1968. I decided to look into the history, and I wound up writing a history of the salmon fishery. It was a great—it was a lot of fun, but a really big eye opener. I learned a lot about Indigenous fisheries. I learned about how the Japanese Canadians were treated and I learned how grim the outlook was. The debate we were having at the time was what's the biggest threat to the fishing industry? Is it environmental degradation of the spawning grounds or is it privatization? I concluded it was privatization, and it was the first one, but environmental one has become the strong second. The cover is very gloomy, but unfortunately my gloomy prognostications turned out to be right, so I feel badly about that. There is some hope there because the union is still there. There are some new ideas coming forward. We'll see. The second one was about Dave Barrett.

KN [01:18:23] Right.

GM [01:18:26] [unclear] Well, I'd been told for years and, you know, I moved here just as he was defeated.

KN [01:18:29] Yeah.

GM [01:18:32] You know, over the years, we got our kid into childcare, which is unusual. Right? Where did this childcare come from? Well, the Barrett government put it here, and then they got defeated so there's no more. My father-in-law was an ambulance paramedic. He and his crowd raised money and went to Alberta to buy a hearse and made it into an ambulance. Later the ambulance service was created. Who created that? Well, that was Barrett. So, the longer I lived in B.C. and the more I talked to people, I thought this, you know, Barrett wasn't a flash in the pan, but if you read about his government, there was, from the establishment perspective, was a nightmarish three years. Couldn't have ended fast enough, you know, bumbling, pathetic, useless group. That was the right wing criticism, and the left criticized it as, 'They blew it. They didn't go far enough.' Then they legislated unions back to work, and so you couldn't find anybody who really thought it was worthwhile. As I started looking at it, I thought, well, it wasn't that useless because I see the benefits everywhere. Rod Mickleburgh had been saying to me for years (he's one of my oldest friends), 'There's somebody who should do a book about it.' I finally said to Rod, 'If you don't, I will, and I'm prepared to do it with you.' We agreed to write it together, and we did. I'm really happy with it. This will sound vain, but it got a huge reaction from people who were delighted to realize that they had not been backing a loser. (laughter) It's like I said earlier, you know, it's easy for people—labour and among New Democrats to say, 'Oh, well, we should've done this, we should've done that.' We did do lots of great stuff. We will again, we are today like—but we gotta have that view. Anyway, that the book was a great tonic to people, and I was very glad I did it.

GM [01:20:24] The last one was called 'Strange New Country'. It was just a follow out of the salmon book because there was a famous strike in the fishing industry in 1900 where against all odds, Indigenous fishers, white fishers, (meaning everybody who was not Indigenous or Japanese) and Japanese Canadian fishers collaborated against the canners, and martial law was declared, and a militia was sent out. I was fascinated that they had collaborated across racial lines at that time and thought we should find out more about it. That is a small book that talks about that, and that was a lot of fun to do too,

because I learned a lot about where people came from. Except for Indigenous people, everybody here is from somewhere else. Of course, that's a truism, but it has big impacts on how the province works, how people spend time here, how we work politically, and so on. Yeah, so the union leader in that case is an enigma—Frank Rogers, who was buried in Mountain View Cemetery. We know very, very little about him, and we don't have a picture at all. The Japanese community leader, we know quite a bit about, and the Indigenous leader, something about. Frank Rogers—he comes on the scene, and then he's shot on a picket line, or he's shot by a railway police in a famous strike that happened in Vancouver in 1903 and died of his wounds. So, that's that—last one. I'm looking at one more guy from that period named Tomekichi Homma who had been the founder of the Japanese Fishermen's Association but decided that year of 1900 to register to vote and launched a court challenge that was successful and went all the way to the Judicial Council Committee of the Privy Council in the U.K. before he was overturned, but a really important democratic action that he took. Also a guy with a labour background in some respects, but also this strong human rights record, all were critical personalities at that time.

KN [01:22:25] Okay. Well, I'm just wondering, Geoff, given all your experience in the labour movement and civic politics and whatever, whether there's anything else you'd like to say about any of your experience in the B.C. labour movement or otherwise, anything at all?

GM [01:22:41] Well, it's a dangerous question, Ken. (laughter) No, I think that's good for today. I think, you know, I was just thinking as I came down here and you triggered me to go back and take a look at some of the bound volumes in the fishermen paper and things like that. Okay. I owe everything to the labour movement, in particular the Fishermen's Union for forming my outlook and shaking me out of a lot of preconceptions and prejudices that I had. I was very privileged to be around so many people who turned out to be shapers of the history of the province as a result of that experience and subsequent ones, both political but also the Indigenous ones and the labour ones. I count myself extremely lucky, and, if I had it all to do over again, I would.

Editor's note: There is an error in the transcript in the paragraph that starts at 53:45. Geoff says, "By ten years later, or 15 years later, the smaller affiliates were much rarer and CUPE was absorbing VMREU [Vancouver Municipal Employees Union] and then the Compensation Employees' Union, and so on." The Compensation Employees' Union was not absorbed by CUPE. Instead, they negotiated an affiliation agreement with the BCGEU.