

Dennis Howlett Transcript

Interviewer: Yeah. Okay, now we're going. So, do you want to maybe talk a little bit about that? Maybe to get started [we can talk] about Marjorie Griffin Cohen being your prof in OISE (Ontario Institute for Studies in Education)?

Howlett: Yeah, well, ... I did various papers for different profs and Marjorie was one of them. She did a course on educational strategies of social movements and so I use that as a way to, I think it was towards the beginning of our work in the Coalition [Against Free Trade]. I was co-chair of the Education and Communications Committee, co-chair with Peggy Nash, who was at CAW [Canadian Auto Workers] at the time. So I used a course paper to lay out a whole strategy for how to... because one of our huge challenges at the beginning was the mainstream media weren't interested in the free trade issue at all; We couldn't get any coverage. So, we looked at ways to maximize the internal communications and education capacities of all the different social movements that were members of the Action Canada Network. So labour, women's organizations, farm organizations, student organizations, churches, like all those different movements and organizations that had collectively a huge membership. If we really engaged all their communications, back then – it was newsletters and public meetings as well as their educational programming – then we could reach a huge number of people. We set about doing that. So, one of the tools I the *Free Trade Action Dossier* and it came out quite regularly, like every few weeks, and it was packed full of updated information news. It was a tool for sharing the educational resources and research developed by all the different members of the organization. So, it—

Interviewer: Oh, like a clearinghouse for information?

Howlett: Yeah. So, it became the key tool for developing a collective analysis and it was quite exciting because each sector had different perspectives. Obviously, the women's movement had a certain perspective, labour had a certain perspective, farm organizations— mainly the National Farmers Union— had a certain... and so people were educated about these different perspectives. As a result, there was a much more comprehensive and systemic analysis that developed than would have otherwise been the case. Otherwise, you know, each sector, each social movement would have had their own analysis without really understanding the whole, the whole complexity, and the free trade issue was one that was going to impact all kinds of sectors in different ways, but still very significantly. So, we were able to, and then in addition we get some opposition. I was one of the key ones pushing for inclusion of regional perspectives. That went hand in hand with trying to organize provincial anti-free trade coalitions and we were successful in doing that, we had one in every province and that was resisted a bit by some of the national sectoral social movement organizations like labour because they didn't want some local, regional perspective to compete with the national view. But we went out and because the free trade

issue also had different regional impacts, that was also quite strategic and quite important. The other thing we really benefited from was we had a source who was a congressional aide in Washington; and because the free trade issue wasn't nearly as controversial in the US, the US negotiators provided regular almost like weekly or very regular briefings to Congress. I mean, that's part of their requirement in that they have to keep their legislators informed about the progress of the negotiations. So, even though the Canadian government was totally secretive about everything going on, we had a very reliable and regular source in Washington that was telling us everything that was going on. So, we had... I kept this in a little file called "Babylon" in case the RCMP would try to search us. Fairly soon, we developed links with key people in the media; Linda McQuaig, was one of the key people, she was with the *Globe and Mail* at the time. We would feed her some of these secret documents and, at one point during the free trade election [1988], Mulroney, in the debates, claimed that free trade would not have any impact on regional development programs, which we knew was a blatant lie and we had the documentation to prove that. It was the Canadian government that offered to cut regional development programs, So, when I got a hold of these documents, I was flying in from Edmonton where I had been doing a public meeting. We had public meetings all over the country, with huge turnouts. Anyway, I called Linda [McQuaig] up and said, "Could you meet me at the airport? I've got some documents to give you." And she did. We went over it and I said, "If you can guarantee that the story will go on the front page, you can have the story. If not, David Crane at the Toronto Star was willing to run with it and put it on the front page. We wanted to put it on the front page of *The Globe and Mail* on a Sunday." This is because the editorial staff over the weekend were somewhat more progressive than the regular folks and so Linda thought she'd have a better chance of getting it in. But then she required, or her editors required, several other sources that would... well, additional sources that would prove that this was so. Then, we had to get into trying to get some documentation from some of the premiers in order to corroborate this other information. And we managed to do this through contacts in Manitoba. We wanted to have a big news conference but there was no guarantee we'd get the media, especially the [established] electronic media, out to our press conference. But if it was in the front page of *The Globe and Mail*, by definition, that's news. So, we knew then we could get everybody, so because the big news was that Canada was willing to give up our regional development funding it would have the most negative impact in the Maritimes. We called the news conference for Halifax and I flew out there and anyway we did get a big, big story out of it.

We did lots of media interviews, I was on *As It Happens* and the government – the Mulroney government—sent... I can't remember now... one of their ministers from Newfoundland out to do another counter media conference right afterwards, but it was front page headlines everywhere in the Maritimes. That did result in the Conservatives losing a whole lot of seats in the Maritimes. Unfortunately, regional development wasn't that big an issue in other parts of the country, so that trend did not carry through. I mean,

even though we did succeed in changing public opinion, basically from 60/40, in favor of free trade, initially, to 60/40 against free trade at the time of the [1988] election. But of course, our first-past-the-post system... Mulroney got 38% or something like and that was enough to give him a majority. He won the election even though we did succeed in changing public opinion in a major way, despite an established media that at the beginning really refused to be a channel for us to do public education. So, we had to find ways around that. Eventually, we became the story and we developed certain key media contacts, and so on. We were able to get into the media towards the end, but it was a tough struggle for a while.

Interviewer: Yeah, and that's a really interesting part of the story. Just how you could establish effective communications pre-internet, you know, communications amongst the members of the coalition but then kind of educating people and it seems doubly challenging with a topic like free trade, which might come across as kind of dry or technical to a lot of people in the beginning. So, it sounds like—

Howlett: That's where... I mean, it was really all the most progressive and creative people from all the different social movements that were drawn together around this. So, even though you know, labour... back then there were real problems with the kind of the corporatist mentality which was very prominent in the labour sector. So, we had a hard time with the top leadership of a lot of the unions, but there were... I mean, there were key people. The Vice President of the CLC was Nancy Riche at the time, and she came on board and other key people in... the more progressive, interesting, creative people came together. Because of that, we had people who had all these creative ideas. So, it was a CAW guy that came up with the idea of the “No, eh?” logo and that became a badge and a T-shirt and everything else. It was the American flag with a Canadian Maple Leaf [as one of the stars on the flag] and that just took off. We also produced... what was it called? “So, what's this about?” “What about this trade deal” or something – a popular, cartoon-illustrated overview of the free trade issue written in a very accessible way, and we organized to have that as an insert in a whole lot of daily newspapers across the country during the [1988] federal election. Pollsters could track a significant shift in opinion as a result of that one popular piece; it was way more creatively done than any of the parties— election literature, which is all dry, boring, stupid stuff. We had a whole engaging kind of approach to it that took people's imagination and won them over.

Interviewer: That's the *What's the Big Deal?* article.

Howlett: *What's the Big Deal?* That's it. Yeah. So, we worked on that and it was fun. Peggy Nash... I mean, she's brilliant. I don't know, if you've had much...you know, she was in parliament for a number of years as well. She was fun, she was engaging, she had a link both with the National Action Committee [on the Status of Women] and with the labour movement [through the Canadian Auto Workers]. She was a key person. We also had, well, just a whole grassroots engagement approach. So, it wasn't just the top leaders of the

organization, because in some cases they were a bit problematic. So, we had to engage the membership and the grassroots activists of these different organizations to create the pressure to make sure that they were all... the different organizations, whether it be labour, or environment, or women, or whatever ... made this a priority. But even so we were operating on a shoestring budget, like we had one or two people at the most on staff with the Action Canada Network. GATT-Fly was one of the main coordinators of the effort.

We identified the free trade issue very early on. In fact, even during the Free Trade Agreement campaign we made public the fact that the real agenda of the US government was to have NAFTA [the North American Free Trade Agreement, which would include Canada, the United States, and Mexico, was adopted in 1996]. So, well, we were warning about NAFTA way back at the very beginning. So partly because ... part of our inspiration was kind of the liberation theology, Latin American of progressive church sectors, we were well connected with Mexican progressive groups and we benefited from their analysis as well. So that enabled us to really be, I would say, quite prophetic in these things, and we were lucky. We had, even though, for example, the Catholic Church is pretty conservative, and it's got even more conservative recently than it was back then, we had a few exceptional bishops, Remi de Roo from Victoria. He was the chair of the Social Action Committee for the Bishops Conference. He was... Even though the bishops as a whole were problematic, we had a few that we could use and were media savvy, good spokespeople and so on. So, some cases, we had to do end runs around the existing leadership, but we did that all very creatively. So, I appeared before the Joint Parliamentary Committee that was reviewing the Free Trade Agreement before it was passed, with Remi de Roo representing the churches. It was fun... Remi was more on the principles, ethics, and the philosophy and so on, and I was more the detailed analysis part of it. But I had made a claim on one thing, and I remember a Conservative MP saying, "Oh, how can you say this and that? Where in the Free Trade Agreement does it say that this would happen?" And by luck I knew, and I said, "page 345," line X, like I had that in my mind and I was just able to... It was, yeah, I was still pretty young then and had not appeared before parliamentary committees... maybe once or twice before. But anyway, I mean, my later years, I was appearing before finance committee and other parliamentary committees two or three times a year. Most recently, I worked with Canadians for Tax Fairness and I got pretty used to being in that role, but back then it was a bit intimidating, and yet, it was fun to be able to put these things forward.

Interviewer: Can you talk a bit more about GATT-Fly? Was that how you got into free trade issues, through GATT-Fly?

Howlett: Yeah, I was on the staff of GATT-Fly. GATT-Fly was set up by the Anglican, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and United churches. In 1973, I came on board, six... five months after it got started. Initially, they just had John Dillon as a staff person and I had just finished my first year at York University. So, I was looking for a summer job and heard that GATT-Fly was hiring an education/communication staff person, so I applied. I had

been plugged in through the Student Christian Movement, so I'd heard about it through those sources. I remember going down to John Foster – who was the United Church staff person and Chair of GATT-Fly at the time – to his house. I even went to Honest Ed's to buy a tie and, like, make myself look a little more respectable... I had long hair and, you know, typical student back in the 70s. Anyway, John opens the door, he says, “oh, come on in. Let's go out the back deck. You want a beer?” So, John Dillon and John Foster interviewed me with a beer on this back deck. At the end of the interview, we got totally engaged in all these things and ideas and everything else. The end of the interview I had to kind of ask...

it was sort of... it was implied that I'd had the job, but they hadn't actually said that. So, I had to ask, “um, so does this mean like, I'm hired or not?” Anyway, I got hired and at the end of summer, I decided, “Shit, I'm learning way more doing this stuff than at York University,” so I finagled a continuing three-day-a-week job there and took three courses in my second year. Then, I just took one course a year and worked full time. But it enabled me to do... I remember my second year I did a paper for a Canadian politics course on the US influence on the formation of Canadian monetary policy, but it was based on secret documents that we had delivered to us, and the Professor couldn't believe it; like a second year student with this whole analysis and information, like you know... Anyway, it served me well, doing my university education part time. I was able to often write research papers that I was doing anyways for my work.

Interviewer: Did you major in political science?

Howlett: Well, back then, you didn't really need a major so I kind of did various things like labour studies, anthropology, economics (with Mel Watkins). Well, I'd also, before coming to York, I had taken a gap year, partly to avoid having to come back. I graduated high school in Tokyo at the American School of Japan. So that's grade 12... I didn't want to come back to Canada and do grade 13; I was finished with high school. So I did a kind of an independent study thing, gap year. The last part of that year I went to Bangladesh right after the war on a relief and rehabilitation project and worked in a remote jungle area with tribal people. So, I did an anthropology course on you know, and I did a paper on the impact of agricultural technology on the social structures of the Mandi tribe in Bangladesh. Because I stayed with two American Catholic priests, who had been part of the guerrilla war, supported the guerrillas and were liberation theologians and had lived there, they gave me all the books on the Mandi tribe and that had been written by anthropologists. After everyone that I read – the priests critiqued each one for me. So hey, I came back to Canada, got these books at the library and wrote the critique of them based on what I heard from these priests. So, in that way, I've done my... and I did a Masters degree as well, but I did it all part time. I really believed in Action-Reflection-Praxis methodology, and that was key to the GATT-Fly approach. So, GATT-Fly was initially set up to look at trade issues related to developing countries, and initially had a little more of a “trade, not aid” sort of liberal perspective, but very quickly it was informed by much more critical analysis from developing countries.

Initially, we tried lobbying on issues like the International Sugar Agreement. There was a UN sponsored International Sugar Conference, which... Canada scuttled the whole thing... But we quickly realized you can't get very far just lobbying government unless you build a strong social movement and strong public pressure. You can't count on the goodwill or generosity of people in power. So, we developed a critical analysis and we began to see the links between underdevelopment in the Third World and issues in Canada and realized that we had to make those links if we were going to build strong public support for change. So, very early on, the very first conference we held even before the free trade issue became a public issue, we had a Mexican leader – social movements leader – they're speaking because we had a global analysis.

So, this whole Action-Reflection-Praxis model was key. It's informed also by Pablo Freire. His *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* just blew me away. ... more than any other book – I would say, Gramsci would be the other one, maybe – that would be my two most influential writers. Anyway, we saw that was important in the approach and we then developed the Ah-hah! Seminar, which is based on Freire's principles. But it's a way to engage people in doing a systemic analysis using, drawing a huge diagram of the world as people see it. Using that to try to facilitate people coming to some common agreement about what the picture is in order to develop strategy or to identify alternative visions and strategies for action. That became a key tool in building local coalitions on the free trade issue right across the country.

I'd actually used that tool in South Africa and in the Philippines. It was picked up by the labour movements in both of those countries and became their main membership education tool. Because in both those countries, South Africa, and Philippines, working class people speak all different languages across the country. Yeah, educated people in South Africa and Philippines speak English, but the working class didn't, so labour unions had a huge challenge. You know, the miners were coming from all different parts of South Africa and they all spoke different languages. So how is the union supposed to do education programming for a membership in that situation? So, this tool allowed a graphic way for people to communicate and understand issues. So it became a huge tool and millions of workers went through this these educational processes. It became quite widely disseminated in other countries as well. So that approach was key to building social movement coalitions in the different provinces, in different key cities, bring all the different social movements together, have them analyze the free trade issue from the different perspectives, build a picture of that, talk about the alternatives and strategies for action. It was a really exciting time because it was a way for us to learn, as well and hear, like, it's a research tool for the activists. I mean, it's an education tool as well, but it was a hugely important research tool because I traveled right across the country and was able to get the perspectives, input, and analysis from all these different sectors and regions. Then... I mean, I'm actually a Christian atheist, don't believe in a God. But if you would [believe it], in the middle of this struggle I had a miracle happen, I happened to win a free

pass from Canadian Airlines for travel anywhere, anytime in the country for a year. I do believe it's right in the middle of the free trade struggle. So, I could go to the airport anytime I wanted, show my pass like a bus pass, and get on any Canadian Airlines plane. At any time.

Interviewer: Were you working for the Coalition?

Howlett: I was working for GATT-Fly and for the Action Canada Network, so I was flying all over the place, doing workshops, organizing local coalitions, learning about perspectives, doing the Ah Hah! seminar. We had big rallies, like the Ontario Coalition Against Free Trade, organized a huge rally at Massey Hall. We filled the place. We made money on it, because we had passed the hat around; we funded staff people and educational resources as a result of that. We had, you know, Farley Mowat, and all these different prominent cultural people, but that was the other thing... you see, we did not limit ourselves to just policy wonky types, we really worked hard at the cultural side of it, the popular side of it, and creating a whole movement. Not just, you know, an academic, research-heavy... I mean, it had that too. Like the key was so often... campaigns are disconnected. They're either research heavy and have good analysis and this and that, but it doesn't really get out very far; or you have a very populous campaign that's not very well grounded in good research. But we really managed to put it together and bring in singers, musicians, artists, and authors and like the whole cultural dimension as well. We even had a big rally out in the Queen's Park in Toronto. Oh, John, what's his name? He was with the Confederation of Canadian Unions (CCU). Anyway, he made a whole miniature golf thing of free trade hazards as an educational tool, out and the different things of, you know, the free trade hazards and it was fun, it was creative. It was... people were energized by it. It was a big disappointment when, you know, the election result happened.

I mean, this is an ongoing frustration in Canada. Social movements have managed to raise consciousness on so many issues, whether it's climate change, abortion rights, or human rights issues, like all these things; we've been actually very successful in changing public opinion and 60% of Canadians have pretty progressive political views, but we're still screwed by the first-pass-the-post election system that allows somebody like Harper to get a majority, even though he only gets like 40% of the vote. So that's frustrating, and that's where partly it motivated me to get a job in Ottawa and pay more attention to the political side, the party politics side, because really that was the missing thing. Like, we had a huge problem with the NDP in the free trade election. Broadbent, at the time, was worried that the Liberals would gain more from the free trade issue than the NDP would [...] I mean, the Liberals took the issue and ran with it. [...] To our surprise, Turner, even though he came from a Bay Street – and it was partly because we did an effective job of getting some of the progressive Liberals to really put the pressure on – and Turner realized, okay, this would be an issue that would distinguish him from Mulroney. So, he decided to run with it, and to his credit, he was actually quite effective campaigning upon it. Broadbent, he just didn't do it. He didn't give it the priority that it deserved and spent time, as they often do, attacking

Turner. So that was part of the problem, too. So, our party politics, even though we worked hard at it, let us down, and the electoral system let us down. So that made me shift my efforts to Ottawa and do more work in that area.

Interviewer: It seems like the coalition was a kind of... I'm wondering to what extent it was a novel way of doing politics and to what extent it departed from the way people did politics before because you mentioned, labour for example, was more corporatist in its orientation. It seems like this coalitional form of politics that was maybe more grassroots and more oriented to mobilizing people from below... it seems like that kind of way of thinking about coalitions was something that was just kind of coming into its own around that time. So, I was wondering to what extent you would describe the organizing at this period... What, if anything, was new about it?

Howlett: Well, what was new was the scale of it. It was really pretty comprehensive. I mean, part of it was, we were able to bring together all the sectors that were going to be negatively affected by free trade. So, the issue itself lent itself to a much broader coalition. But coalition strategies... again, we were inspired by South Africa. I actually traveled to South Africa, even back in the Apartheid era, to do Ah Hah! seminars, with groups there. So, I became friends with people in the social movements in South Africa and saw the national social movements... not just the ANC, but there was a whole student, labour, and the whole social movement sector. In fact, in my analysis of South Africa, they were the ones who actually succeeded in bringing down Apartheid, not the ANC. I mean, the ANC were expelled from the country. They were off in , you know, Botswana, and Zambia and their armed struggle was not very effective. If anything, even maybe counterproductive. So really, it was the social movements who succeeded in bringing down the Apartheid regime and a key part of it was international solidarity as well, which my wife was working for the churches in the Inter Church Coalition on Africa. It was one of the key spear headers of the anti-apartheid campaign in Canada. So, I had a lot of friends even from before I went to South Africa in the anti-apartheid movements. That was a key inspiration for us in Canada, so we wanted to build. Tony Clarke, who was at the Bishops Conference and he became the Co-Chair of the Action Canada [Coalition] with Maude Barlow. He had a strong coalition, analysis as well. In GATT-Fly, we all share that kind of analysis. So, we realized social solidarity coalition building was the key. Yeah, it's not easy. There were tensions, but we really tried to build a process where we could listen to each other and learn from each other. I mean, that became key to us. So, mediation and...

Interviewer: What were some of the tensions in the coalition?

Howlett: Well, one that I was quite involved in was the whole National Organization versus Provincial/Regional thing. There was a lot of skepticism or caution from other movements about labour being too dominant and throwing their weight around. There was a labour conference that they tried to pull together; they invited some businesspeople and all that too. Key people in the social movements boycotted and pulled out of the Planning

Committee and it didn't happen as a result. So, there were some tensions there and the CLC, at the time, was not very progressive. I mean, we were lucky; Nancy Riche, who was the vice president, who was from Newfoundland, had been a Newfoundland Federation of Labour president. She was more sympathetic and so we were able to kind of manage these things. Because Nancy was a woman and she had been involved with the National Action Committee [on the Status of Women], we were able to bring some of them in. Yeah, I mean, part of it was you had to work on the personality level as well and because I had been doing a lot of workshops all across the country, I'd actually met with a whole lot of different sectoral activists. So, I was able to kind of understand some of the key hot issues and figure out ways to build some common linkages and analysis. I mean, it has to be done on an analytical level, as well as a personality level as well. Just in some cases going around people you have to be flexible, you have to be strategic, you know, it's tricky, but when it works, it pays a lot of dividends. You know, it really makes it quite interesting and exciting. I mean, the Action Canada Network had assemblies that moved from region to region. It created... It was interesting, like, it created a sort of a buzz. "Wow, there's something interesting happening here," and it drew people in, and it was infectious. You know, the spirit of it.

Interviewer: Were the assemblies open to everyone?

Howlett: Oh, organizations... They had to be people representing organizations. And there were a few people that came that were a problem. But if people weren't based in some organization and had an organizational representation, they weren't invited. So it was, it was managed to some extent. But...

Interviewer: How many assemblies were there? It looked like there were quite a few shown in the article.

Howlett: Yeah, I can't remember now exactly how many, but there were at least two or three a year, or even maybe even three or four a year, like every couple of months. Well, because it was a fast-moving issue. Like, we didn't have a whole lot of time. So, yeah, no, we had to move quickly. It was before, like, I can't remember now, we really didn't use the internet that much and we didn't have, I don't think we had a website until later. Yeah, back then we didn't have a website. How did we manage?

Interviewer: Well, just the communications infrastructure really comes down to significant and all the different layers of it, the assemblies and then—

Howlett: Yeah. I have all the copies of the Action Canada... the *Free Trade Action Dossier*, which later became the *Action Canada Dossier*.

Interviewer: I'd love to see those. That sounds really neat.

Howlett: Yeah. Oh, they were, what...

Interviewer: Where did you... How many did you print and where did you circulate them?

Howlett: Um.

Interviewer: Did you mail them to all the organizations?

Howlett: Yeah! Where is it? So it's pretty—

Interviewer: Cool.

Howlett: —elements. You know like—

Interviewer: That's the first one?

Howlett: —it isn't fancy, but they were coming out every month. So, I think it was a monthly publication.

Interviewer: And you just kind of collect the news and stories from all the member organizations?

Howlett: Yup

Interviewer: Okay.

Howlett: So, there were about 20 dossiers produced and then we also pulled together when the Free Trade Agreement, we were ready when the Free Trade Agreement got announced, we had an analysis team all pulled together that took it all and went through it. So, we had you know, top academics and researchers from the different movements all kind of came together to pour through the thing and produce an analysis like immediately. So, there were briefing notes that were produced like almost immediately and it was on all the different topics: analysis of the energy chapter, analysis of wine and spirits, agriculture, technical standards, rules of origin and border measures. Like so, all this, we had experts in every area of the agreement, trade in automotive goods, government, procurement, investment chapter, like we had everything all covered. We then distributed that to the whole network, like immediately.

By that point, the media realized what was going on, partly because we would release some of the information we had during the negotiations from our source in Washington, selectively release that to different media people and so on. So, they knew we had an inside source of information. We had the top analysts on each of these areas of issues and we drew in, yeah, experts who could do the analysis of it. So, I mean, I'm not a particular expert on that many things but I'd read all that so I could do you know, Peggy [Nash] and I would do media conferences and so on, as the co-chairs of the communications committee and I would benefit from all this analysis. I mean, it was all there; so it was pretty incredible. The other thing is... trying to see if I've got a copy of the *What's the Big Deal?* thing, but I can't—

Interviewer: I've got a copy of it.

Howlett: Oh, you got it. Okay.

[...]

Interviewer: We're trying to come to an end, I think. Before we wrapped up, I'd been, I was really interested in... Well, first of all timeframes. So, like, when does the A Hah! seminar get started? Like around what year would that be?

Howlett: That was, oh God. 1982? No, I can't remember.

Interviewer: I have a—

Howlett: There's a book.

Interviewer: —copy of the book for—

Howlett: Okay.

Interviewer: —*Between the Lines*, right? I think.

Howlett: Yeah, I wrote that. I think it was around 82 or 80.

Interviewer: 80, yeah, beginning of the 80s. So, was that right when you started it or did you end up doing Ah Hah! seminars for a while?

Howlett: I had been doing all seminars for a number of years.

Interviewer: Okay.

Howlett: We started doing it at the time in the early 70s, or mid 70s.

Interviewer: Okay.

Howlett: Initially around the World Food Conference, which I think was 1974. Anyway, as a way to engage people in a structural analysis of food, that solution wasn't more aid – food aid – it was land reform and reducing the gap between rich and poor. I mean, that was what had to be done to solve the food crisis. So trying to get across this issue in a more structural analysis was seen and then, after a number of years when I developed the methodology and worked at it, we actually, I had a chance to meet with Paulo Freire.

Interviewer: Oh, wow.

Howlett: And when he heard my description of this and all that, he says, “oh, you must write a book and share this with other people.” So, he's the one who told me to write the book and then actually make efforts to share it globally, with other movements. So yeah, no, he was quite... I spent a whole afternoon with him.

Interviewer: Wow.

Howlett: So, this is like, my hero and I get [together] with him.

Interviewer: How did the seminar invite action reflection on free trade? Like, how would people go about kind of making this visual map of free trade using the A Hah! seminar?

Howlett: Well, the methodology starts with people putting themselves in the picture. So, they have to describe okay, you know, where do you work, where... or if you're with a women's organization or, I mean, we are using it mainly as a coalition building tool. So, each person from different sectors would describe where they were, what their issues were, what the challenges were, and so on, and then we would look at, okay, then what is free trade gonna do to you, to your issue. But then people would learn from okay, this is how it's going to affect farmers, this is how it's going to affect workers, industrial workers, how it's gonna affect social service workers, public sector workers alike.

So, you start to build the analysis of how all the different sectors are going to be affected and you realize, "Holy shit, you know, this is going to be a major problem for us." It's not just for us, it's, you know, there are all kinds of other people, sectors are going to be affected negatively as well. It's kind of a no brainer, we'd better all get together and try to do something about this. But then part of it we would always, we really felt it was important to have a positive alternative, not just... and this is the limitations of some social movement coalitions is if it only is a fight back coalition, it can only go so far. Coalitions that actually have a common vision of an alternative can be much more transformative and not just... and so that was the whole point of from resistance to transformation. The key is building a coalition with a common alternative positive vision.

Interviewer: So, what was the alternative vision of the free trade coalition?

Howlett: Well, a more self-reliant economy, that saw the way to strengthen the economy was actually to diversify but also reduce inequity because that's key and we see that in, you know, globally, economies where they reduce the gap between rich and poor and it generates a huge new market for things. You don't need international trade if you give farmers, you know, enough land that they can actually support themselves, they actually become a market for goods and support business. If you give poor people enough money they actually support local businesses, and so on. So, you— Interviewer: So that Ah Hah! seminar kind of invited that kind of analysis to—

Howlett: Yeah.

Interviewer: Like, "Well, we know what will happen with free trade, but if given our problems on the ground that we've already expressed, this is another way we could go to address those kinds of issues."

Howlett: Now, we also are pretty careful not to just be anti-trade, like the analysis was, "This is not mainly a trade agreement; it's a corporate rights agreement." So, it's not just, I mean, the reducing tariffs was the least of our problems with the Free Trade Agreement, it was the

investment rights were a much bigger problem and limitations on what governments can do, whether about environment, or social programs, or regional development programs. Those were the key problems from our perspective, so... and that same goes, I mean, after the free trade fight, the next struggle we took on was the GST and we were very careful not to fall into an anti-tax trap. We—

Interviewer: Who is “we” in this?

Howlett: The Action Canada Network.

Interviewer: Okay.

Howlett: So, it went on to mobilize a huge vote against the GST and put forward a progressive tax agenda. So, that led to the whole alternative federal budget movements, both on a provincial level and at a federal level.

Interviewer: So, was the alternative federal budget produced by the Action Canada Network, or were they recreating—

Howlett: Well, the Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives took the lead in developing that, but that was like, it was part of the movement that came out of the movement against the GST. That had both a progressive tax component because part of the analysis was, “Look, there are ways to do way more on poverty reduction, or action on climate change, or, you know, all these other things.” The alternative federal budget drew in all the same social movement groups and I guess it was a pretty seamless connection. I've been involved in the alternative federal budget, you know, all along from the very beginning. Most recently, I've been on the CCPA board so I've been involved, right, all along. And again, that was inspired by some third world groups that we were in touch with as well. Cy Gonick out in Winnipeg, John Loxley leading a few other a key academics, as well as social movement groups all came together. That has been quite influential overall, in terms of, well, it's had a huge impact on influencing the NDP policy agenda and to some extent, the Liberals as well. It said, the key thing is it's bringing together the analysis with real good statistics and economics and all that to ground and give credibility to social movement organizations, to have a credible program to say, “Oh, you don't have an excuse for not doing more on reducing poverty here.” So, the way progressive taxation could raise the money that was needed – and this is the way it actually has a positive impact on the economy – the way it cuts costs on health care. Like you do all that analysis and it's pretty convincing, but it forces social movements to be much more grounded in some real, you know, concrete analysis.

Interviewer: The kind of grassroots research you guys were doing is really, you know, it's really impressive. It's also like interesting, or you describe it as “fun,” you know, it's like bringing people together whereas a lot of, I think, a lot of research, especially in academics, it can be really depressing, right?

Howlett: I know, like, and the Ah Hah! seminar has allowed me, you know, I've done seminars up in remote northern communities; I was invited to do it for a whole flight back on low level flying in Labrador. I traveled to the Philippines, South Africa, and my colleagues went to Nicaragua and other places like, it allowed us to, and work with The Steel Workers Union. I was invited to do steel workers educational seminars, over and over and over again. Also auto workers, and a number of other unions, CUPE, OPSEU. So doing all those workshops you get to know people. You know, Leo Gerard became the head of the Steelworkers International. He was a good friend; he was the education director at one time and he is the one who every year I'd go into a steel worker Ah Hah! seminar with. Yeah, so it's all these tools, it's putting it all together.

Interviewer: How many seminars did you do around free trade? Do you remember? Like, approximately, it'd be like—

Howlett: 30 or 40? Like a lot.

Interviewer: Wow. As you flew all across the country with your free flying pass, to go do—

Howlett: Yep.

Interviewer: Nice.

Howlett: Like, you know, people would hear about it, and like it was a real—

Interviewer: How many people would show up? Were there a lot of people?

Howlett: Well, that was one of the limitations of the methodology, it wouldn't work very well with a group of more than about 30.

Interviewer: Okay.

Howlett: So, if it got too large you just couldn't get everybody participating.

Interviewer: Would it normally be like members of the Coalition that would be sharing their different kinds of points?

Howlett: Yeah, or it would be you would invite a couple of people from each different key sector in a community to say, "Here, come together to talk about possibly organizing a local coalition." So in like Edmonton or Vancouver, or you know—

Interviewer: Do you have any memorable kind of seminars that were like, especially kind of memorable in terms of how they played out?

Howlett: Well, yeah, and also many, like I did one in the Philippines with progressive farm organizations up in an area where during the thing we started hearing machine guns. Whoa at that, and then somebody came in and said, "oh, some of these people need to go back to their village because if the military is coming in the region and if they see that certain men

are not at home, they would suspect them,” so they had to go. I did it with Dole pineapple plantation workers and sugar workers.

Interviewer: How about with the free trade coalitions?

Howlett: Well, pretty much right across the country. So yeah, Newfoundland, P.E.I., Nova Scotia, like pretty well every province and in many provinces, there were several key cities, more than one. Yeah, it was pretty, pretty intense by having a young family at the time. So, it was tricky juggling all the things.

Interviewer: It's also interesting with your background because the free trade struggles at that time are often framed in a very nationalist kind of way, but it seems like GATT-Fly was very internationalist in perspective, right? Also, the fact that you're bringing in trade unionists from Mexico, like when did you bring in trade unionists from Mexico? Would that be early on?

Howlett: Very early on.

Interviewer: Okay.

Howlett: We organized the first National Conference on the free trade issue. [...] We invited at all the different sectors, and we invited a Mexican.

Interviewer: What year was that? Like, '80, '85, or something, maybe '83?

Howlett: Yeah.

Interviewer: I think it's in the article that you sent me.

Howlett: Yeah, it's in there.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Howlett: It was held in Orleans at a convent. You know, I remember there was a bit of a tension like, Maude Barlow and the Council of Canadians were the other key organizing group. There was a bit of tension, partly because they were so nationalist. We had a much more internationalist perspective and Maude's an old liberal. We were kind of left of NDP, if any so there were some tensions. But you know, Maude had means to get to John Turner and that worked. We had ins with the NDP and Bruce Campbell was the research director at the NDP at the time, he later became CCPA head and he was so frustrated, he was an ally, he supported us, but he couldn't convince Broadbent and a few others of the importance of the free trade issue. So yeah, there were tensions around the internationalist, but there was a lot of openness to our more internationalist perspective to how we carried the day in terms of overall.

Interviewer: But it's interesting with what happens after, right? With the kind of anti-globalization movement becoming much more like... the links connecting to the Maquiladoras and in Canada, and all this stuff, so—

Howlett: You know, I was a member of the Maquila Solidarity Network as well, and on that committee—

Interviewer: When did that get started? I feel like it was after '88, right?

Howlett: No, it was before.

Interviewer: Really? Wow. Okay.

Howlett: Yeah. So—

Interviewer: I have to revise my timeline.

Howlett: Yeah, no, we were working away at that, you know, before it became a big issue. There was a small group that was working on that as well. I had actually visited a Maquila in the Philippines where it's very tight security. You know, I met with some of the workers because there were churches involved. I had church links and they were supporting the workers and so on. But I passed myself off as a son of a factory owner in Canada who was interested in possibly investing in Maquilas you know, getting some contracts and so on. So, I did this whole number, and they gave me a tour. Maquiladoras gave me the whole song and dance, you know, promo thing on the investments. But then when I walked out of the main central building, nobody followed me to the gate, I just walked into the factories and started talking with the workers. I got a whole insight into the whole thing.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Howlett: So yeah, no, it's—

Interviewer: Yeah, it's really interesting to hear all this international solidarity work happening in the 80s. Leading right from in the 70s, right?

Howlett: Yeah, and I did seminars with sugar workers in the Philippines, as well. We organized the whole International Sugar Workers Conference as well. So, we were very international in practice, as well as analysis. [...] To get into the sugar worker areas, we had to go, this was back in Marcos' day and there was war going on in the Philippines. So we had to hide, you know, certain things in bags of rice and stay with sugar workers in their houses. We couldn't get together until after dark when it was safe for sugar workers to gather. I talked to the sugar workers and, you know, it was pretty exciting. I got to know key leaders in the Philippine armed struggle as well. I was the chair of the Canada Asia Working Group,

which was another inner church coalition project, so I was very much involved in the Maquila and human rights struggles in the Philippines, Korea, and several other countries. So, I had that, kind of was my volunteer work. So, I had that connection.

Interviewer: That you had going into the free trade struggles?

Howlett: Yeah.

Interviewer: Yeah. I mean, it connects to like... I guess one of my last questions about, you know, why the churches were so involved in this and the politics around the Conference of Catholic Bishops and things like that. It's like, were folks in the kind of church community supportive of GATT-Fly in opposing free trade? What were the politics like around that?

Howlett: Well, GATT-Fly started out when John Foster went to UNCTAD in Santiago, Chile, and came back. And there was a seminar sponsored by the Canadian Council of Churches where he said, "The Canadian government was just awful in shooting down all the proposals from the UN that would have helped developing countries around trade issues. So, we need to do something about this." So, there was kind of a positive response to that. That's when they set up GATT-Fly and that was one of the two first inner church coalitions that got started. But then, later on, as churches began working together, it kind of became a way for – even though in most of the churches the progressive views of this were in the minority – it became a way for the progressives in each denomination to be able to come together and support each other.

We were able to get support financially, engage church leaders, and bring them on board. And you had a few key leaders like Archbishop Ted Scott who was progressive, and Bishop Remi de Roo, like you had a few key progressives, and Bruce McCloud, United Church moderator. It just happened that there were a few progressive church leaders who kind of thought this was a great idea and so promoted this ecumenical cooperation. Yeah, and that led to Project North on indigenous issues, which later became in our church the Coalition on Aboriginal Rights. So, and then Taskforce on Churches for Corporate Responsibility, like a whole number of them all came up partly because of the success of GATT-Fly. It's inspired collaboration on a whole lot of other issue areas as well. TCCR Taskforce was quite instrumental in coalescing church campaigns on anti-apartheid. The whole boycott campaign actually, you know, got Mulroney on board. So, there were a whole group of us that were in these coalitions that all were working together. That's partly where we developed the skills of mediating and bringing people on board; like, you had to do that because many of the churches the majority were still pretty conservative, but we worked hard at engaging churches. So, on the free trade issue, we developed bulletin inserts during the election campaign and a whole lot of churches, like hundreds of thousands of them, used them, reprinted these, put in their church bulletins, did, you know, educational events, discussions to help bring the churches on board, and you had to work at it. There were

some tensions; there were some criticisms about us being too focused on other movements and not enough of the churches and we had to kind of say, “Okay, we have to put more effort into engaging church membership and doing more Ah Hah! seminars with church-based groups, as well,” so we didn't have to respond to some of the pressures. But we were lucky for the most part. We had, you know, some good leaders

at that time. Now, the Catholic Church backslided and fired Tony Clarke, and, you know, to this day, they're pretty reactionary, comparatively speaking from what they were, but it was all in the context of the Vatican too, there was kind of some fresh winds blowing in the churches. They did have some common concerns about refugees, about environment issues about... so there were some basis for being able to build some coalitional collaboration efforts but it was in some ways those were inner church coalitions, so we honed our coalition building skills initially at the church level and then applied that to building broader coalitions. So yeah, we learned some skills along the way, for sure.

Interviewer: So, I think this is kind of getting to the end. I had like some wrap up questions about the legacy of the free trade struggle. The struggle around free trade had been shaping Canadian politics and shaping the trajectory of the Canadian left, you know, going into the 1990s and into the present. So, what lessons could be learned from the struggle against free trade?

Howlett: Well, I think coalition strategies became pretty important. You know, it's kind of ebbed and flowed to some extent, but it's been key. The Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives hosted the Pro-Canada Network in their office. So, they were, and they continue on today to be important. Broader social movement kind of coalition. The labour movement, I think, has been influenced. There was, back then, the whole social unionism thing was not big, like, it became much more a dominant view within labour. I think some of the... well, one of the problems with social movements is when they're isolated, they can be kind of parochial, but Canadian social movements, I think, because of the coalition, our experiences have been much more progressive and have a sharper analysis.

I mean, I've become involved in a number of international coalitions as well, International Jubilee Debt Cancellation campaign, Global Call to Action Against Poverty, and Global Alliance for Tax Justice, and have ended up playing key leadership roles in some of those international coalitions. I mean, it's partly the Canadian thing; we are seen as kind of third force, mediator type country. But I remember when that global debt cancellation campaign was trying to get going globally, the World Council of Churches was one of the key organizations trying to move it forward. I got a call; I was going to be attending this global conference to kind of launch the whole thing and I got a call saying, “Hey, Dennis, can you be the co-chair of this event? We have somebody from the South and there was an African Vice President of the World Council of Churches who was going to be the co-chair but they needed somebody from the North.” But none of the European coalition groups were acceptable to the south. I was the only northern person who was acceptable as a Canadian to be the co-chair. We had a meeting in Malaga, Spain, where we had to pull this together

July 27, 2022

and oh, my God it was tricky because people from developing countries were insisting 100% debt cancellation and the Europeans were saying, "No, we just need a debt forgiveness to a manageable level, not cancellation but debt reduction." So, we had to try to work, and you have to work these conferences, or you know, negotiate around the edges to try to build some consensus and all that. We pulled that off, we got a global campaign going. Then the Global Call to Action Against Poverty. Same thing, like it was tricky; north and south there are different perspectives on the issues; but I ended up being invited to address a special session of the UN General Assembly representing the Global Call to

Action. I mean, whoa. That was pretty trippy. Anyway, then the Global Alliance for Tax Justice. Same thing, huge tensions north and south. I was asked to chair the session of this meeting to try to launch the Global Alliance because I was able to mediate north and south and all that, and so I'm now the treasurer of the Global Alliance. I used to be the vice chair, which was much nicer but now I'm the treasurer, which is not a fun job. You have to do all fundraising and signing off on all the expenses and producing financial reports and everything, but I'm still, even though I've retired, I'm still doing that because they can't find anybody to take over the treasurer job. So, I mean, it's all coalition building kind of stuff, like, whether it's national or international. It's been challenging but also a lot of fun. Like actually we've managed to make the tax justice issue a global issue. Now it's being seriously debated that the UN should take the lead on an international tax treaty rather than leaving it to the OECD which is dominated by the rich countries. So, we've made action on tax havens, the major international issue, and a minimum tax for corporations. I mean, all these things. We're up against bloody multinational corporate and imperialist powers and everything else. Yet we've managed to make significant, significant progress on a number of fronts, which, it's not easy but it can be done. You know, it's the key to it is having multi levels, strategies, and coalition all approach, I think.