

Episode Title

Communities, Identity and Borders: What does the Kenmure Street Protest tell us about belonging to Glasgow?

Anne Kerr

Hello, today we're telling a story of community resistance and solidarity

And we begin that story at a former bowling club in Glasgow's South Side. 166 years after the Kingston Bowling Club opened, this site began a transformation into a different kind of community hub - for a different kind of community.

Nowadays, it's a thriving Urban Common, a space that hosts activities designed to foster wellbeing, strengthen the community ties and provide much needed green space for the richly diverse residents of Pollokshields

And our situation here is important, The Bowling Green is on the corner of Kenmure Street. Back in May, this street became world famous when a community protest disrupted a Home Office raid to remove 2 people suspected of immigration violations

At the heart of the protest was a memorable act of solidarity - local residents and immigration activists demanded peacefully *but emphatically* that the detainees were part of the community. And in an unprecedented move, the two men - aided by human rights lawyer Amar Anwar - were released from a police van marooned in a sea of people, back into the heart of Pollokshields.

I'm Anne Kerr, welcome to Recovering Community, the podcast about communities; how they are built, broken and remade.

It's summer 2021 and Kenmure Street is back to its usual peaceful self. But one thing that really struck me about the portrayal of the May protest was how it was framed as part of Glasgow's long history of people power.

So how does activism and community in Glasgow figure in relation to belonging and borders - be that in the U.K. or Scotland?

To talk about that, I'm joined by my colleagues Cetta Mainwaring and Teresa Piacentini who have been researching migration and community activism, as well as taking part in activities that support migrants in the city. I'm also very happy to welcome Pinar Aksu, development officer at Maryhill Integration Network. And David Millar, a Kenmure Street resident.

Let's begin with some context. I asked Teresa about the Kenmure Street protest...

Teresa Piacentini

The Kenmure Street, Dawn raid took place, you know, a few minutes up the road from here. And it's an interesting place to start. Because what Kenmure Street, for me represents is the kind of culmination of 20 years of activism solidarity and protests in the city of Glasgow

I was sitting at home working and I was checking on my Twitter account. And I saw a notice from the Anti Raids Network saying there's an immigration detention van in Kenmure street, get down there if you can. So literally, chucked some trainers on, grabbed my keys and went down. And that was maybe about half 10 in the morning. And at that point, there was already the police van, there, some police presence, about 20 folk. And the anti raids network activists were already under the van. And that was the start of what became a very long day, culminating with something which I have never seen in the 20 years that I've worked in this area, of immigration officers backing down and releasing somebody back into the community. So it was really very remarkable on lots of different levels

Anne Kerr

There was a huge amount of media interest in it. And I'm interested in your own experiences from actually being there on the day. And what kinds of people were there with you, particularly people maybe who hadn't been to that kind of event or protest in the past. Could you, could you reflect for me about that please?

Teresa Piacentini

What's often the case is... these kinds of moments as you see the usual suspects. So there's lots of people you recognise, and that's very comforting, and important and has a real value. But what is also really important, to see lots of faces that you wouldn't normally see. I think, again, the fact that it took place in this community meant that our neighbors and our friends who live in Kenmure street flats, were out there as well. And I think that there was a shock that it happens on their doorstep.

David Millar

I'm David Miller and I live immediately beside the site of the Kenmure street protests that happened outside my window. And I was sitting in my kitchen when I heard the first protester's cries outside in the street. Well, it's what kind of thing you don't really expect to happen outside your window. I was literally sitting in my kitchen, and thinking, you know, what's that noise? I came through and suddenly saw this what looked rather dystopian scene of about 20 policemen, all kind of like dressed in skip caps, completely still and circling a van, it was really weird.

Teresa Piacentini

So I do think that it opened people's eyes a little bit to what the home office is capable of. And in that sense, it was really valuable because it showed the kind of violence that the home office is capable of and disregard for human rights, disrespect for the Scottish Government. It is no coincidence that happened on the day that they were getting sworn in, which made it very difficult for the Scottish Government to get a hold of people in Westminster. But I think for me, what's been really interesting is the conversations I've had since, with people who I may have wondered about their views on immigration, if I'm being perfectly honest, being kind of shocked about what happened. And I hope then it was a teachable moment for them to understand that the immigration enforcement does happen to your neighbours, the people that you see that you say hello to at the bus stops, that you see, you know, walking up and down your street, and that no-one is safe unless we're all safe is a really important message that for me is one that came out really strongly that day.

David Millar

The spread of information was actually really interesting, because, you know, I think what, what precipitated a lot of people's involvements initially, was that it was Eid al Fitr. And it's, you know, we're at the center of the Pakistani community in Scotland, and round this area, there's a real kind of expectancy on the the run up to Eid, you know, there's a lot of folk, you know, getting together, they're going out getting food in for family celebrations. So it was just looking out and thinking, Well, do you guys actually know, you know, what community you're in, and what day it is? And it seemed inappropriate. And generally, people looked out of the windows, and saw something in their street that they thought was wrong. And they decided that they would go and do something about it.

Anne Kerr

I want to introduce Pinar Aksu. Pinar is a campaigner and a development officer with the Maryhill Integration Network, an organisation founded to bring asylum seekers, migrants and refugees together with the settled inhabitants of Glasgow.

And Pinar felt the build up to Kenmure Street

Pinar Aksu

I guess for me, it started a month before in April when one of our members at Maryhill integration network, he experienced dawn raid in the morning, and he was, well he's 67 years old. And we learned that the immigration officers came to their house and he panicked and because he had a heart condition he was, had to be taken to the hospital. From there, then we kind of did an outlet of asking all the networks, asking all the integration groups and everyone else in the city to say this happened to one of our members. Is this something that has been going on for a while? And then we ended up finding out that actually a few more cases happened since last year of 2020 during the...towards the end. And then I guess from there, the networks and groups were starting to mobilise in terms of what to do or what happens when a dawn raid takes place.

Anne Kerr

For most, the excitement of the protest was swept away in the next day's news cycle, but for local residents, it took some getting used to, and David Millar felt compelled to act...

David Millar

The day after, it was really quite surreal, because it was, it was so quiet. And I think I took a photograph 24 hours from the protest, just to show how quiet the street was. And interestingly, people after the protests, cleared up all the rubbish and took it away, you know... It's our home, our community, and, you know, they looked after our street, as well as our neighbours. But I think, what didn't dawn on people, particularly people who were who were very close to the protest itself, it's actually that it's really quite stressful having a shouting crowd and, you know, in many, many policemen, police, vans, police, horses, sort of in your, in your community. And I think it took, you know, a couple of days for people to kind of come down from that.

One of the things I think was helpful was that, you may know that a spokesperson for the home office characterised the protest as a mob, which, you know, I think a lot of people are quite aggrieved by, bearing in mind that the protests have been supported by our MSP the First Minister, our MP, and also the Justice Minister for Scotland. And somebody in the streets, printed out some leaflets, stuck them around the closes on Friday, suggesting that we come out on Saturday at noon, you know, with some banners and to make it clear that we were not a mob. And that was the genesis of our, of our community group, Not a Mob.

We had clandestine meetings in the bus shelter that you might have seen beside the immigration van, we kind of called it the people's bus shelter. And I'm thinking of writing to the council to see if we can get the name changed since actually we don't have a bus. So it was really just a case, particularly people who aren't involved in other refugee or, or international organisations. I think what we realised quite soon afterwards, was that you know that there are a lot of people. And actually, this is really fundamental to the day, that the reason the protest really worked, was there a lot of really committed activists who mobilised very quickly to resist the home office's actions. And, you know, I was involved in a number of anti racist organisations when I was a student, but haven't really over the over the last, obviously, 20 years, and really, you know, didn't have an up to date understanding of exactly how maligned the, the legislation had got. So I think, you know, what, what we decided to do was, we wanted not to replicate what other organisations were doing, but we're looking at ways of raising some money and raising awareness using the background of Kenmure street, to kind of keep the flame alive.

Anne Kerr

And the power of the community reaction inspired other activists across the country, here's Teresa

Teresa Piacentini

The night after the Kenmure Street incident, the anti-raids networks have been really involved in training people to know what to do when they see an immigration enforcement van in their neighborhoods. But the night after I attended an online session organised by Haringey Anti-raids network. And that was really fascinating because they said, normally they have maybe 20 or 30 folk that come. And that night, there were 200 people signed up. And they kept referencing Kenmure Street.

And they kept referencing Glasgow, and all the questions in the chat, because it was an online event was all about how can we do what we did in Glasgow? And I think what it did it put fire in people's bellies, particularly people who feel that and look on and see the injustice, but just don't know really what's required what they need to do, how do I connect in? So what I could also see in the chat, were people connecting across different English cities and neighborhoods. And so I think that Kenmure Street is being held up really as as kind of an ultimate act of solidarity against the home office, but a real learning moment for people to think what can I do differently, and particularly so for younger activists coming through now, because if we've been doing it for 20 years, there's a lot of learning and knowledge we can share. But actually, it's also changed, the landscape has changed quite radically as well.

David Millar

I don't know. It was weird. I kind of felt a responsibility since it happened literally outside my door, to do something. And because of the fact that we couldn't meet together because of COVID I thought, Well, how do we kind of capture people and actually make sure that we we keep in touch with people who weren't were motivated to get involved. So I got the website going and decided that a good thing to do would be to have some kind of survey just so that we could, you know, collect some feedback and what people thought about the day, I think one of the questions was, you know, give me three words, you know, about what you what you felt about the day, you know, just to just to get, give give a kind of a, an essence of people's involvement and then think about an image that you know, that you might be able to share. And also tell us what skills you have that you might be able to offer to any campaign. And at that point, we really didn't know what we were going to do, whether we're going to be a campaign group or we're going to raise money where we're going to, you know, it's difficult to, to know from a standing start, I thought it might be useful to be able to share that information with your elected representatives and other bodies, just to be able to give some kind of feedback. But it was really just to have something a stake in the ground of an organisation that was was going to do something in the future. But the other interesting thing is that, you know, I've lived around here for about six or seven years that Pollokshields in the multi ethnic community that it is, has suffered a number of onslaughts from, you know, right wing and racist organisations, and has dealt with them, and the community is resilient. So, in some respects, you know, the protest was a predictable response in many ways. And that's me learning more about the history of the community. And you know, people were talking about, you know, remembering when the police horses were cantering around the grass at the end of the road, people were talking about when police horses were deployed during the Govan Hill baths dispute years ago, you know, so there is a kind of a community memory of things, and one that I've been learning about since the protest itself.

Anne Kerr

There's so much to ask about with the different contexts, both in terms of the past and how, how we've got to this point, but also about how things have changed since that episode, but more generally too, so maybe just to turn to the past and the context a bit more and to bring Cetta in as well. What is it that's perhaps particular about Glasgow, as a place where these forms of solidarity come, come to the fore?

Teresa Piacentini

That's a really good question about what is it about Glasgow and it's, it's something we kind of wrestle with in our research and our teaching and in our conversations. I think Glasgow's really long history of activism and solidarity. Not necessarily just about migration, but about class and rights and social injustice is something that lays a really important foundation. And if you look back to dispersal when it happened in 2000, the people that were involved in setting up, for example, the Glasgow Campaign to Welcome Refugees, they were long standing activists in Glasgow, there's these kind of historical experiences of, and understandings of what it means to be, you know, marginalised, vulnerablised by the state. Excluded. And I think that really lays those really important foundations.

Cetta Mainwaring

Yeah, I think the Kenmure street protests I watched online from Edinburgh, it was in Edinburgh.

Anne Kerr

This is my colleague Cetta Mainwaring. She researches the movements of migrants, particularly in the Mediterranean

Cetta Mainwaring

And it was an incredibly powerful moment of a community coming together. And this moment when border controls and migration controls... the violence inherent in them is visible I think, which is often invisible, made invisible by the state. And so it was an important moment in that sense, and a very powerful one and seeing all these people on the street resisting this violent police presence and being successful in it, also something that doesn't happen often. But I think what maybe wasn't as visible, watching it online was this longer history of activism that Pinar, Maryhill integration Network, other groups have been involved in since 2000, at least but again builds on this longer history of activism around inequality and injustice. And I think that's, to me, maybe this confluence of factors in Glasgow of activists working on different issues, from housing, from poverty, from migration issues, that all connect in different ways. And that connection often isn't made by academics or activists, or normal people don't see those connections. This this idea that if one of us isn't safe, we're all not safe. And so I think that that history, although yes, often romanticised, then mythologised, is a really powerful platform on which to carry on with activism and, and resistance in this way.

Teresa Piacentini

Can I just maybe add, it's an important point about the history of immigration in Glasgow as well, because we're Pollokshields just across, you know, five minutes, 10 minute walk away we're in Govanhill. And Govanhill has a long history of different immigrant populations moving in and moving out. So when I was growing up in Govanhill, it was a largely Irish community that was there. And as somebody from an Italian background, we were the outsiders. And then the Irish were replaced by the Asian population that then moved to the kind of Pollokshields. Now what we have are predominantly East European and Roma community in Govanhill. So there are lots of stories about the movement of people in the city of Glasgow, which I think feeds into these questions of how we address inequality, identity. What it means to be a Glaswegian, and who gets to make that claim to be a Glaswegian, which I think is a very important question that we shouldn't take for granted, but definitely feeds into these

stories about the city, whose is the city, right? In Kenmure Street we were saying these are our neighbours, these are streets. These are our homes. So you know, who makes claims to belong to the city is a really important question to reflect on as well.

Anne Kerr

I'm glad you mentioned Govanhill because I did want to ask as well about the, the other side to this really, which is, you know, something that we don't celebrate about Glasgow. It's the sectarianism, it's maybe also racism, it's hostility to different kinds of identities. And it's also linked to a kind of British nationalism, in some cases, which is in tension with some ideas about Scottish nationalism. So what, what would you say about that, that other side that... because that's the community too, right, how does it intersect with the kinds of communities that we maybe think more warmly towards?

Teresa Piacentini

This is a really important question about the dark side, right? of community. Because this notion of community means that people belong to it, but also forcibly people don't belong right they're on the outside, there has to be a boundary for any kind of community. And that's something you have to grapple with. I mean, if we think back to, you know, 2000, when dispersal happened across Glasgow, and the different neighborhoods in Glasgow, there was a lot of racism. And there was a lot of animosity and a lot of hostility, not just locally from people, but also in service provision. I worked for a long time as a community interpreter. So I was in and out of lots of hospitals and Doctors surgeries, and the comments I would hear from reception staff, flippant comments from people sitting waiting, you know, it was racism there. And there still is racism without a doubt. So I think we need to move away from 'there is no racism in Scotland'. 'There's no racism in Glasgow', we know there is. But I think that over the years there has been a lot of learning. And that's been through a lot of the hard work of organisations like MIN, like the integration networks, but also the more positive pro-immigration message that comes through the political, the political rhetoric from the Scottish Government.

Anne Kerr Script

Pinar sees these issues play out on a daily basis, in her work with the Maryhill Integration Network

Pinar Aksu

Just on the question about what community is and about the idea of community, I would say, especially for Maryhill, you know, Maryhill is considered to be an area where there's on ongoing issues around poverty, and in its own on rights. So when you bring new members of communities, obviously you can't avoid, but to have some issues or concerns. And I think that's why we need to have dialogues and conversations and engage with who's in the community. Because if we don't know, the neighbors who are coming in, that's where we, the local community, starts thinking about, oh, who are these people? Are they, they're just coming to our community, they're taking our houses, they're going to take our jobs. These are the things that we hear over the years again, and again, and the label that's given to people who are seeking asylum and refuge.

Cetta Mainwaring

Yeah, I think that the darker sides of community, the racism that we see, in some ways, unsurprising when you have racist policies, migration policies, informed by Britain's colonial histories, that you would expect then to have some racist response. And to me, this is always a struggle, right? between people who see things differently, who are trying to resist those racist policies. And those tensions that we've been talking about, I think, are exacerbated by not only migration policies, that place people, disperse people into areas that are already poor that are already deprived, but also other policies that have undermined working class conditions in this country for many decades now. And so it's building, sort of layering on those inequalities and injustices, and we can see how some of the UK home office's policies like detention, like trying to detain people offshore now, all of that is an attempt to cut these ties in communities to make more invisible, the violence of migration controls, Kenmure Street demonstrated just how powerful a community can be.

Teresa Piacentini

Dispersal is, at its very core about disintegration, it is about segregation. And this is why it is so effective as a policy. So on the same day as Kenmure street, there was another person that was detained, another man that was detained elsewhere. And I think if I'm correct, he was somebody who was homeless and presented at a homeless shelter. Now, what that tells you is that somebody who's embedded locally with neighbors, is somebody who's connected. Somebody who is made homeless as a result of racist home office policies, is somebody who the home office has achieved their goal, they have disconnected this person, and they made it impossible for them, or very difficult for them to keep connected, to get the solidarity and support. So I don't think we can under emphasise enough, the segregatory nature of dispersal and what it has set out to achieve. And so, Maryhill integration network, Govan Community Project, South East integration network, what they are, they are an act of resistance in and of themselves, because they connect people together. And it's not just integration networks, but it's also Unity Center, Glasgow Campaign to Welcome Refugees, the Living Rent Campaign, around the Serco lock changes, which was about Serco who was a housing provider, forcing people, changing their locks, and forcing them out of their house if they were considered to be appeals rights exhausted. So at the end of the asylum process, so what you have are lots of different campaigns and organisations that absolutely have to survive based on their connectedness, their social networks, and dispersal was about doing everything it possibly could for that not to happen.

Anne Kerr

So listening to you speak, I'm really struck by the emphasis on the work that it takes to keep, I guess, remaking a community and keep reinvigorating it and keeping it, keeping it going. But at the same time, there's another set of work going on elsewhere around these imagined versions of communities to which I want to turn to now. And first of all, maybe, to just look at this idea of British identity, and how that figures in the work you do. Is it something that is seen as you know, slightly comical or laughable or objectionable? Or does it actually have any resonance with the kinds of things that you're trying to achieve for your communities?

Teresa Piacentini

The sense of British identity that says an interesting question, I don't feel it. It doesn't feature in anything I do. And I think that's maybe because I'm Scottish, I'm from Glasgow. I definitely. To me, it's

about the people who are here in Scotland, now, it's not to say that it doesn't. The British aspect of it doesn't count. It does because of how immigration is reserved to Westminster. So we have to be attentive to British politics in that sense. But for me, you know, maybe that sounds like an extreme response. But British identity isn't a feature. And it isn't a feature with anybody that I've worked with over those years. It's, it's about finding somewhere where they feel safe and protected. It's about people saying Scotland's given me a home, and it's about a Scottishness that resonates with them, and they see their children as being Scottish. And I think moves like most recently, refugees having the right to vote in the Scottish Government, they're the kinds of things that really solidify our Scottishness as opposed to a Britishness

Cetta Mainwaring

Yeah, as also not a, not a British person, as a, as a Maltese woman, as someone from a former British colony in fact, I think it's important to keep in mind that there are particular policies that encourage that nationalist response that isn't progressive, but also that people whether it's a British identity, or a Maltese identity there are, you know, an infinite number of ways people imagine that identity, it's not just one British identity that we're speaking about. And so I would emphasise that, and I think in a lot of the work we've done, Teresa, people are actually constructing their identity in contrast to certainly the British government, certainly these these migration policies, a lot of the work that's being done here in Glasgow, is, is in contrast to that saying, we are not like that we don't want dawn raids in our community, for instance.

Pinar Aksu

Yeah, I guess for question about British identity. There's two aspects. When we work with people, I don't think that's a conversation it was ever raised, or it was something that we talked about, but it's about people finding their own identity and people reserving and showing their own identity as well to proudly show and to represent their identity and their culture is really important for people. And I think that's where the differentiation between assimilation and integration comes from. It's not about having a group of people to integrate into community where you lose your identity, where you lose your culture. But it's about where you learn from each other, where you have that space, and where you can actually feel free to carry both identities and both cultures or even more than both, if you have, depending on where you, how you see it. I mean, work is another thing, when people are seeking asylum, people don't have the right to work and it, it has a huge impact on people's identity, on people's future on and how they can contribute back to their communities, but also use their skills as well. And that's something we have been working on for the past few years with the Lift the Ban campaign and in Scotland with right to work. Maybe just a side comment as well. Over the years, we do hear when it comes to issues around politics and hearing about, well, we don't have power over this. But it's something that you need to also explore in Scotland, we shouldn't maybe sometimes bring the conversation back to independence all the time to say, you know, if we had independence, we will have the power to do better. We need to start exploring about what we can do now. And how we can make the changes now, rather than having to wait.

Anne Kerr

Okay, so that was quite emphatic in its rejection of British identity. And that's really fascinating. I guess it's just the the next question I have is about the future really, about what happens after Kenmure Street, after all of the other developments and incidents that we've we've spoken about what's the future for community organising and support for people who come from all sorts of different parts of the world to be here in Glasgow with us?

Teresa Piacentini

I think that the COVID context is one that we've not really kind of put to the foreground but it's obviously changing so much for so many, even just the fact that dispersal, a pause on dispersal to Glasgow is very worrying because where will people be dispersed to and that's my worry is talk of offshoring, barracks. This is problematic. So we have COVID context. And then, we also have in Priti Patel and in our current government, a particularly aggressive, nasty, punitive set of policies coming through that are incredibly worrying. So I think that for future organising, there needs to be more. I think what we saw in Kenmure Street in the aftermath, and we see in organisations like the anti eviction network, we see some more sophisticated types of organising, actually that is adapting to responding to home office tactics and policies. But I think we need to be very careful and very wary about what's coming next, because we should not be surprised by anything that comes from the home office in terms of trying to, you know, punish people for claiming asylum. What's really important is creating those opportunities for people to connect, because of social isolation that people have felt through COVID. And the practices of neglect of people in the asylum process through COVID, are really an extension of the practices of neglect they already experience before COVID. So I'm optimistic and hopeful. But I'm very wary and cautious of the kinds of work that will need to be done in order to ensure that people feel safe and they have the opportunity to claim asylum, which is the right

Anne Kerr

Thank you for listening to Recovering Community, if you're enjoying this new series, please subscribe and share it to your social networks.

I'm Anne Kerr and I'm grateful to Kenmure Street resident David Millar, to my colleagues Teresa Piacentini and Cetta Mainwairing, and to Pinar Aksu from the Maryhill Integration Network for joining me today.

Many thanks also to The Bowling Green on Kenmure Street for hosting our conversation.

The music in this episode is by the Glasgow based Iranian musician Aref Ghorbani, whose song *Gole Pamchal* is part of Exile - Fograich, a project by the Glasgow Barons.

You also heard Welcome Home by the Maryhill Integration Network's Joyous Choir.

Thanks also to staff in the School of Social and Political Sciences and the College of Social Sciences who helped with this podcast. You can find details of some of the research published around this subject in the show notes.

Recovering Community is produced by Freya Hellier.