

INTERVIEW WITH BUNNY McDIARMID  
INTERVIEWED BY KATHLEEN GALLAGHER 2004

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KATHLEEN: Okay, a lot of your international political work, or any social work, has happened in conjunction with Henk (Haazen), and I was wondering, when you met him, in New Orleans, did your getting together as a couple have social change as part of your relationship? Was that something that was in your frame of mind at the time, to change the world?

BUNNY: Part of our attraction to each other is the way we see the world and what we want to see in the future, and when we met, we both were on our way to South America and had more interest in going and doing that than in the States. So, yeah, to some extent we see the world similarly, but there's also lots of differences.

KATHLEEN: I guess my question is – has mostly to do with, at that age, when you left New Zealand and arrived in the States, for this life journey, in a way, with Henk, whether politics or social change or peace was part of your reference as a woman and within your relationships where you were feeling that's where you want to go, this is what you want to do in your life?

BUNNY: Yeah, definitely, for me. I think that, for me – I mean, I grew up in a big family, Catholic family. My parents were quite involved, not as radical activists, but were quite involved in the kind of social side and social justice side of the Church then, which meant we had some interesting people that came through our house, people that were leaving Chile because of Pinochet, and - so I got some exposure to what was happening outside in the world, but it wasn't until I went to university, I think, that I tried to figure out, how do you explain what's happening in the world, so I tried feminism and a few other isms and nothing sort of really did it, so, you know, I was always interested in that side and I always sort of had a sense that you should do something useful with your life, like you had to have a job that actually contributed something, didn't just kind of pay the rent, which was very idealistic in a way, so I guess that part of going to South America was wanting to go somewhere very different from where I had grown up and I'd heard a lot about liberation theology and the Catholic Church, and there were some Catholic priests at the time who were working in Chile and doing some pretty extraordinary things with people that were less fortunate than me, as my mother would say. So I was interested in a lot of that, just kind of trying to figure out how the world ticked, really, and what made things the way they were.

KATHLEEN: So then you - some time later you guys ended up in Amsterdam, with Henk, and then you guys met the Fri, or joined the Fri. How did that happen?

BUNNY: It was Henk that originally met David Moodie, who was the skipper of the Fri. He started visiting the Fri, which was in a canal in Amsterdam, she was about to start a major repair job on her decks. She was a very old, 100 year old Baltic trader sailing boat that was maintained and sailed in a traditional fashion. Neither Henk nor I had ever been sailing before so it was a bit of a – you know, a very different experience for us. So we started going down to the boat and liked what they were doing, like working as a group of people on the boat and going off and doing all these social projects around social justice issues was really attractive to both of us; the whole mix of it, working as a kind of community at sea was something neither of us had done before and also kind of doing

good stuff. It was really, really attractive to us, so we really wanted to join and so we started helping them out to repair the boat. Henk was actually a lot more useful than I was because he was a carpenter and I'd spent my after school life in a university so I didn't have that many practical skills, but I really liked the whole atmosphere, and everybody did everything on Fri to make the boat leave the dock, so we could sail across the Atlantic and do this project that we were doing in the Carribean. So I got to do all these things that I had never had qualifications for, and that was one of the biggest learning experiences on Fri - it taught me to do something. I didn't have to have the piece of paper that said, "You're a history teacher," or "You're a carpenter," or ... It was just a belief in that with enough people, with enough will, you can make something happen.

So, yeah, we joined Fri and we sailed across the Atlantic. It took us longer than Columbus. It took us fifty-eight days to go across the Atlantic, because we, I mean, when we had no wind we floated around in the Atlantic like this [mimics], we flopped backwards and forwards until the wind came back. That was an experience, being at sea with twelve or so people and I – it was sort of the best and worst experience in terms of group dynamics so I learnt a lot about living in a community in a very confined space. When we got to the States and we arrived off the coast of Florida, I remember, and we'd been at sea for a very long time and we sort of went ashore and went to a local national park where we could have a shower. We didn't have hot running water on Fri, so going to have a hot shower was like a real treat, and I remember Alice Heather, who was one of the women on the boat as well, she and I walked into this sort of ablution block in the national park and here was this huge mirror and we both sort of – we hadn't actually looked at ourselves for sort of fifty-eight days. "Oh my god, look how long my hair is!" "I'm very brown, aren't I?" "You didn't tell me I had something up here." It was really like re-meeting yourselves. We had none of that on Fri. It was quite a different sort of experience. It was quite fun. But then we got to do a lot of really good projects with Fri. KATHLEEN: Tell me a little bit about the essence or the atmosphere of the people at Fri. So now look, who were these people? Were they from one country, many countries, and what was the boat like? What kind of a boat was this? What was it like sailing, practically sailing and doing this kind of—

BUNNY: Very practical sailing because it was traditionally maintained and sailed, so there were no winches on this boat. I mean, you hauled the sails up, big gaff-rigged sails, by hand and we had an old engine on board which you had to heat the heads with a kerosene torch before you could build up enough pressure to get the fly wheel going to start the engine, so using the engine was not a regular thing,. We did everything sailing, so it was a wonderful experience learning to sail. I mean, we had no electronic equipment on board so we navigated with a sextant and we had to really conserve water because we had a very small day-tank on board and then we caught rain. That was really the level of the lifestyle. Things like cheese and eggs were really a luxury. If someone had a birthday, they got a block of cheese.

BUNNY: Most of the people were attracted to Fri for the same things that we were, you know, it was a combination of things but predominantly that they were doing good things with good people and we had very little money. We kind of pooled our resources really. There were people from all over the planet and generally people got on board if they group thought it worked and it worked with these people. I mean, there were good sailors

on board, obviously. Henk and I weren't very good sailors because we had never sailed before, but we were fast learners. It is quite an extraordinary experience to work with a bunch of people who are really committed to making something happen. It's quite a natural high to finally make this thing happen, which seems extraordinary, and a lot of people are attracted to this idea: we're all quite ordinary people, but together we can do this extraordinary thing. Incredibly empowering and – yeah, *Fri* has a kind of extended family around the world, I think, a couple of hundred people, that sailed on her at one time or another, either taking books to Namibia. She sailed from New Zealand to Mororoa in the mid seventies as part of the anti-nuclear protest movement. She worked in Caribbean while we were on board and took medical equipment to Nicaragua, so she did a whole lot of things with lots and lots of different people, and really, what sailed her was just people's will, because we really had very little money. What we made from charters or doing projects was usually just enough to keep the boat running. None of us were paid; we were all volunteers, but we got an enormous amount out of it, and a lot of us are still in touch today and a lot of us moved on and did other things in a similar vein as well, so it was an extraordinary experience to have, a really privileged experience to have, at a really influential age, for me, anyway.

KATHLEEN: The extraordinary thing – you were talking before about the ordinary people doing the extraordinary thing. What was that, what was the essence of the extraordinary thing? What kind of things did you do, where did you go?

BUNNY: Well, the time that we were on *Fri*, it was just after the Sandinistas had taken over in Nicaragua, so they had gotten rid of Samosa, but they were at war, basically a US-funded war against the Sandinista government and there was a lot of – and the situation for the people was bad, so there were a lot of people in the medical and church fraternity that had banded together to help and decided that what they needed to do was send medical supplies. So they collected them from around the States and they drove them. What was needed in trucks, you know, bandages and basic medical supplies down to where the *Fri* was in Florida, at St. Augustine, and loaded them onto the ship and then sailed down to Nicaragua and unloaded them there and they were distributed through the church networks there. So it was a simple thing to do on some levels, but it was really an extraordinary number of people all doing their bit to get this – well, it was really impossible to get into Nicaragua at that time, really, really needed supplies so it felt, it was great, there were lots of really great people helping to make this work. Yeah, if you said, "Nicaragua needs medical supplies, let's find some way to help," people would go, "Oh, no, that's too hard." The red tape and the bureaucracy and the politics and the money and the time, it's too much, we can't do it" but, you know, with enough people, you can do extraordinary things.

KATHLEEN: What was it like arriving there? When you arrived were you scared?

BUNNY: It was actually, because we arrived off the coast of Nicaragua at night, which wasn't a particularly good idea, and we were coming into Bluefields, a kind of military port for the Sandinistas, a protected port, and they'd had a lot of attacks along their coastline from what they called cigarette boats coming in very fast and doing kind of bombing raids. So we arrived and we're in a big old sailing boat and we've got our navigation lights up and we're sailing along, and all of a sudden there's a spotlight on the boat and a couple of Navy boats and they're hailing us in Spanish to say who we are and what we're doing there and what our intentions are, and thankfully we had a very good

Spanish speaker on board. He was in his bunk asleep so he rushed up onto deck in a white toweling robe tied together with a leather belt and started negotiating with the Sandinista Navy in the middle of the night, off the coast of Bluefields. They were very anxious and nervous on their side and we were all very anxious and nervous on our side and David, the skipper, kept telling us all to stay below, and we're all, "Oh, we're nearly here, what's going on?" We're all up on deck trying to follow this conversation and when we got tied into dock in Bluefields all these guys popped up with machine guns, so they were all there ready to protect their harbour if they needed to. So it was possibly a naïve way to arrive off the coast of Nicaragua, but it turned out all right. Something a little bigger than you that watches over you. So it was an interesting arrival in Nicaragua.

KATHLEEN: Maybe there's something special about being naïve, you know, you're less threatening maybe in a situation like that. Is that the main trip that you did on the Fri to Nicaragua, or was there other?

BUNNY: No, we also worked for an alternative aid and development organisation called Plenty, in the States, and they were an arm of a big kind of hippie community that kind of went back to the land in the sixties called The Farm and they developed lots of enterprises in their community and one them was an alternative aid and development organization, so they had approached us to take soya and solar technicians and equipment to different places in the Caribbean, so we did a trip with them and we went to Haiti. Mother Teresa's organization there ran a hospital for babies and hospitals for sick and dying people, which was an extraordinary experience.

We were taking equipment to Mother Teresa's organization in Port-au-Prince in Haiti and Haiti was – well, it still is to a large extent – was in really dire circumstances then. People were really struggling to survive. I mean, people even in the main city there couldn't even get drinking water, clean drinking water. The nuns who ran the two places they had in Port-au-Prince, one was for orphaned babies, and another one was for sick and dying people. The nuns there were all very young which was interesting. I was in my twenties then too and I've never wanted to be a nun but they were – I could have been a nun, after seeing what those women were like. They were really amazing. They had all their habits kind of tucked up into their belt, you know. They were very practical. They were very demonstrative, and they worked in a place where there were a lot of people dying of tuberculosis, a lot of men dying of preventable diseases, and they were, you know, squeezing people's hands. And we were taking equipment into Duvalier (Haiti's dictator at the time) - the sisters, or daughters who were running a hospital as well. But in order to bring equipment that was badly needed at Mother Teresa's organization we also had to bring stuff into the Duvalier organization so that was what we did – that was one of the stops we made with the Plenty organization, and they were also a pretty extraordinary bunch of people working around the Caribbean so we – that was another project that we did with Fri. That was also – yeah, that was great. You felt like you were doing something, yeah, doing something good.

KATHLEEN: Did you have any idea that these situations existed in the world at the time? Did it change you as a person when you finished doing these two trips? Did you feel like you were someone else, your eyes had opened to something different?

BUNNY: Well, yeah, of course it changes you to some extent. I mean, it wasn't like, totally, "Oh, my goodness, not all the world is like New Zealand," but I mean I liked

what I was doing, I liked that I didn't have to be someone different at work to who I was. I liked what I was doing. I have had some jobs where I'm just paying the rent, which is always necessary, but mostly, I have had jobs where I feel this is what I like doing, this is where I'd like to be.

KATHLEEN: So then you finished working on the Fri, and so was there like a time when you guys decide you're leaving the Fri and joining the Warrior immediately? How did that transition happen?

BUNNY: Well, we were on board Fri for about two and a half years, I guess. And we were back in the United States, at St. Augustine, and one of the people who had been on the Fri was Martini Gotje. He was – he actually taught us how to sail - he was our watchmate on Fri and he sort of moved in between the Fri and the Warrior depending on how much he could take of the bureaucracy or the confusion or the whatever was going on in his life so he kind of moved in between, yeah, working for Greenpeace on board ships or and - and Greenpeace was quite a small organisation then. I mean, I didn't know anything about Greenpeace when I first went to work for Greenpeace. I really had never heard of them, to be honest. So when we were - we were on Fri in St. Augustine, and Martini came – he had left Fri about a year, six months earlier – and arrived back at Fri and he had just got on board the Rainbow Warrior as a first mate, and the Rainbow Warrior was also in Florida. It was sort of up a creek in Jacksonville sort of waiting to be turned into a sailing boat from a motor boat, and it was a bit kind of abandoned, in lots of ways. So he came down to visit us on Fri and he was telling us about what the Warrior was going to be doing; it was going to the Pacific and the focus was on nuclear issues and Henk and I got quite interested in what he was saying. And I had been away from New Zealand for about seven years then, quite a long time, it was a very long time and I hadn't seen my mother or my father or my family in all that time, and I guess I was sort of getting to that point where I was maybe a little too far away and it was time to go back again. So this – for lots of reasons it seemed like a – an opportune thing to do was this was an opportune thing to do was to move from the Fri to the Warrior as crew. So we applied to be crew on board the Rainbow Warrior and we were accepted so we packed our things and moved thirty miles down the road to the Warrior, and the difference between the Fri and the Warrior was vast. It was like going from South America to America. On the Rainbow Warrior we had hot running water in our cabin – we actually had a private cabin, Henk and I – and we had a door that closed so it seemed like the lap of luxury in a way after being on board Fri. And there was refrigeration and lots of choices of what you could eat, and it was quite a different operation after being on board Fri which was really a tight group of people making decisions together and running the entire thing, pretty much, to a much bigger operation, and I really knew very little about Greenpeace when I joined Greenpeace.

KATHLEEN: I'm going to ask you this question, it seems like it's going a little bit backwards but not really – I'll try to be eloquent about it, when Henk first saw the Fri or when you guys went on board the Rainbow Warrior I get the impression things were happening by accident, a little bit. Were you actively looking – when Henk met David – were you actively looking to get involved in international political groups?

BUNNY: No, at the time Henk was doing some voluntary work for Greenpeace when he met up with David but I had applied for a couple of jobs with like the Minority Report

group in the UK, I'd tried to get a job around the kind of organizations I thought were doing things that I would be interested in doing, but it wasn't like we had this set course--

KATHLEEN: I wonder if at the time there was a feel of change in the air, a feel of kind of meeting people, a kind of "let's change the world" kind of feel in the air, then more than now, maybe?

BUNNY: See I'm a hopeless optimist about just about everything really, which I think you kind of have to be really. Well, in this line of work - because otherwise you could just put your head between your legs and cry. There wasn't the Internet then, there was a lot more word of mouth and people talking to each other and I think there has always been a sense of, depending on who you're working with, talking with, a sense of change and a sense of, you know, doing the impossible, partly because you feel you absolutely have to and also partly because you feel you can.

KATHLEEN: So you sail on the Warrior, you left the States, you arrive in the Marshalls?

BUNNY: Well, we stopped in Hawaii first, and there were three Marshallese guys that joined us there who were from the Rongelap community from the Marshall Islands as crew and I think it was a bit of a rude awakening for them being on the boat because we were - we ate a lot of vegetarian food and they were very used to eating a lot of regular meat and fish, fish particularly, and they struggled a bit. They spent quite a bit of time in their cabin opening tins of tuna, I think.

So they joined us in Hawaii which was great, because it was about a two-week trip, it took us about two weeks to sail from Hawaii to the Marshall Islands, so we had a lot of time to talk about what was going on there and what it was like there - nothing can really prepare you for what it's like in the Marshall Islands, if you haven't grown up on an atoll out in the Pacific ocean near the Equator. But the person from Greenpeace who was like our campaigner on board, the political person who was sort of running what we were doing had spent a lot of time pulling together information for us. We had a lot of videos and information on board about what had happened there and the Rongelap Senator, Jeton Anjain had come down and visited the boat in Hawaii. I remember him coming on board the boat and we'd been at sea for a couple of months and everyone was like, "Oh, land, and we've got mail and you know, loud-talking and la la lah," and the Senator from the Marshall Islands arrives and he's very quietly spoken and very deliberate and I remember him talking to us and I kept thinking, "How is this man going to do anything? He's so quiet. Why doesn't he get angry about what's happening?" But he was an incredibly persistent terrier. His people were lucky to have him, the world was lucky to have him, but I remember thinking "Oh, gosh, this man is, like, trying to do the impossible. He was trying to get the United States, to realize that their testing had contaminated his home island, and they needed to own up to that, they needed to fix it and they needed to help his people out. He was also trying to convince his own government that they needed to stand up to the United States, where they got a lot of their income from and support their own people. He was trying to convince the Rongelap people that they had to leave their island where they had lived for hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of years, get on a boat with people they had never met before in their lives who didn't even speak their language and go to an island, where they never seen before and live there. So, quite an extraordinary man, but very quietly spoken. But, you know, he did it. He did it. In a way it was quite an extraordinary marriage, between Greenpeace,

a strongly anti-nuclear organization, and the Rongelap people, who had got done over, royally. I was really lucky that that was my first experience in Greenpeace was that, because it was kind of new to environmentalism. I didn't know what it was. If you had asked me in 1984 what an environmental group was, I couldn't have told you. A lot of environmental groups including Greenpeace have shifted dramatically. I think for a lot of people- the environment was that bit of nature over there that didn't have any people on it. Thankfully, things have changed enormously, but for me this kind of experience with Greenpeace, this experience where the people were the significant part of the story, what had happened to them and to their environment and the whole nuclear weapons issue was all wrapped up in my first experience of Greenpeace, and it was a very moving one, because we went to Rongelap, which was out in the middle of nowhere, well not for them, probably, but out in the middle of nowhere and it's a beautiful island, it's also an atoll, where the U.S. regularly sent scientists from Brookhaven and Lawrence Livermore laboratories, which were military scientific institutions, to study these people, to study what happens to a controlled population when you are exposed to nuclear radiation fallout. The Rongelapese felt for years that they never really got real information about what happened to them, what was going to happen to them, if it was safe to live on Rongelap, if it was safe to eat the coconuts on their trees. You'll probably find a lot of people in the U.S administration at the time who said they gave them as much information as they themselves had, without even acknowledging, publicly, that they screwed up. They, the US actually deliberately, did it. So their Senator had convinced the Rongelap community that basically they needed to move because they were not sure they could live there safely and because it would have an impact, it would send a really strong message to their own government and to the U.S. people about what had happened, and they needed Greenpeace to help send that message and it was a message that we were really interested in sending. So it was a great combination, really. And I don't think that everyone in Rongelap was really convinced that this boat was really going to show up and move them, because they had some bags packed but the houses were all still intact but they had a wonderful welcome. They had kind of decorated this archway on the beach which said, "Welcome, we really love the future of our kids."