

A celebration of life

Victor Martin

Friday, 20th December 2019. Mintlyn Crematorium, Kings Lynn

24th September 1940 – 4th December 2019

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

Vic was an only child, born and raised in the tenements of Glasgow. More than any other city in Scotland, Glasgow is renowned for its traditional tenements of between two and five storeys. Constructed of red, beige, and grey sandstone – most of which was quarried in the Stranraer and Dumfriesshire areas – the majority of Glasgow’s tenements were built between 1840 and 1920 in order to address the exponential rise in the city’s population that occurred as a result of the Industrial Revolution. The rapid growth of Scotland’s heavy industries at that time attracted thousands of workers to Glasgow, mainly from Ireland and the Scottish Highlands.

Life in these tenements was hard. The phrase which accompanied the Industrial Revolution of “Let Glasgow Flourish” did not appear to stretch to the poor people of the city, who lived in what we would now call slums. An outside toilet shared by many families, and cramped, dirty conditions were a reality in those days. Every Saturday morning Vic would go to the local public baths with his shilling, and pay for entry, a towel, and a bar of soap to have his weekly bath.

Add to this that the Martin family were the only Catholic family in the Protestant tenement, that Vic’s father was not very present in his life, and that his relationship with his mother was difficult, and you begin to understand how hard life was for Vic as a child. Nevertheless, he did have good memories of cycling to his grandmother’s house to spend time with her and his cousins, and riding his bicycle in the wild and untouched areas of Campsie Glen, enjoying the long summer evenings.

Vic was clearly an intelligent boy. He won a place to Grammar School, and would certainly have been a candidate for University if that had been an option for someone from his background.

By the time Vic left Glasgow for South London, his Socialist values had been formed. He first worked for the Inland Revenue, where he was a Union Shop Steward. He later became a tax consultant, but this did not change Vic’s approach to his appearance. Although his hair turned white, he continued to wear it long. Throughout his life he wore a t-shirt, jeans or denim shorts, a grandad shirt, and denim jacket.

For some reason, on a particular day, the London Evening Standard newspaper decided to do a feature on “The Scruffiest Man in London”. They approached Vic, who was walking home after a day working as a tax consultant, and who can know what they expected to hear. We can know that they did not expect to hear Vic, looking as he did, telling them about what he did in his working day. And what does that teach us about stereotypes and generalisation? Vic Martin certainly did not fit the mould! The fact that Vic is wearing that same “uniform” today seems most fitting.

Vic’s first marriage was to Jilly. They had two children: Angus, born in 1965, and Beki, born in 1968, both of whom are here today to say good bye to their Dad. Although their marriage did not last, Jilly and Vic always remained friends, which is great testament to them both.

Beki and Vic did not always maintain contact, but came together as adults. Beki has memories of how much Vic enjoyed visiting her at her home in Stroud, where he could enjoy meeting people with a range of views and outlooks, having healthy and robust debates about politics and socialism.

Vic, Angus, and Beki spent hours discussing life, putting the world to rights over bottles of red wine and the occasional spliff. Beki knows that Vic was proud that he – a man who “talked the talk” – had a daughter who for many years lived her life in an unconventional way and who actually “walked the walk”. She credits Vic with being influential in her life, and knows how proud he was of her recent involvement in the Extinction Rebellion actions.

Vic’s second marriage was to Jenny. They met when they were both working behind the bar of a pub in Croydon, and Jenny remembers being drawn to this interesting man. They were married in

1975 in Croydon registry office, and one memory Jenny has of their wedding day was a frantic phone call from Vic in the morning saying he had no clean socks for his daughter. Jenny duly raced round to his home with a clean pair of socks, and she reflects this was a very typical thing that Vic would do.

In marrying Jenny, Vic became step-dad to Claire and Becky. He was a supportive but strict parent, who pushed the girls to achieve their potential. Becky credits Vic in her continuing with her education for as long as she did.

Vic was a fantastic and loving grandfather to Ben, Kizzy, Khloe, Joshua, and Jack. Ben's A-level politics course gave them the opportunity for many debates, with Vic playing his role of devil's advocate, and Ben putting forward a rounded view of all aspects of the argument. Vic would have been so proud to have seen Ben embark on his philosophy degree at the University of East Anglia next year. It's fair to say that although Vic was prepared to listen to the points Ben made during their discussions and to the views of others, he never wavered in his beliefs.

Rebecca Elliot said that: "Vic was an inspirational, funny, generous and astute man. I greatly admired his confidence, his vast knowledge and his ability to smile whilst destroying his opponent. He will be sadly missed. Most of all he will be seething...but hopefully he will now haunt Boris out of number 10."

The grandchildren were never afraid to let their Grandad know their opinions and thoughts on anything, and both Kizzy and Khloe loved to challenge and play with Vic. Kizzy has gone on to do a degree in International Politics, and would have great debates with her grandad. Khloe had a natural affinity with her grandad, and has carried on the great tradition of the Martin's, from grandfather to son and from daughter to grand-daughter of being a "know it all" in the nicest possible way.

Wherever he lived, whether Glasgow, Croydon, Palmers Green, Huntingdon or Norfolk, Vic would always proclaim himself as a proud Socialist. His enthusiasm never waned.

He was a member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the Anti-Nazi League. He stood shoulder to shoulder with comrades from London on the picket lines, supporting the miners, and such was his commitment that somewhere, sadly unknown, Vic's face is embroidered onto a banner, which is probably still being carried on marches by comrades.

Peter Smith remembers marches with Vic, saying: "Vic leaves us with so many memories after 15 years of friendship. We marched together so many times, shoulder to shoulder, with your burning passion for justice and fairness. We debated fiercely as friends and comrades. You entertained us with your Glaswegian humour and stories. You were always ready to stand up and be counted, always the first to volunteer to man the barricades. And your knowledge of the party rulebook was second to none! Socialism is built on the shoulders of giants like you."

In addition to Vic's knowledge and passion, he was a great storyteller – he had such good stories to tell! Cat Ness remembers: "I had an evening with Vic and Jim Waters in a pub in Swaffham last time I was in England. First time hearing his battle stories of his journey into politics and socialism. One of our greatest generations of storytelling. He will be sorely missed by us all."

More memories have been shared by people who knew and admired Vic, such as Jim McNeill, who wrote: "We spent many a time over a beer or two, debating issues, chewing the fat. One particularly memorable occasion was during the 2017 election campaign. The two of us were in the same car in the campaign convoy. We ended up in a pub singing Irish rebel songs with gusto. I'll never forget

it". Although Jim and Sandra are unable to be here today they will be raising a glass to Vic and thinking of you all.

Even those who did not always necessarily agree with Vic's particular views have acknowledged Vic's personality, such as Eden Kruh-Atar who wrote: "In the time I knew him I came to respect his strong principles and good character even when we didn't see eye to eye. I won't forget him welcoming us warmly into the party when me and my father first joined. I'm sure Vic's particular brand of fiery Glaswegian labour politics will be greatly missed in meetings."

Julie Coulter remembered a particular memory: "One of my favourite memories of Vic is very much in keeping with both his working life and his determination to root out tax evasion. Picture the scene...it's January 2011 and freezing cold. Norfolk Coalition Against the Cuts, Downham Market group, has set up a crime scene outside Downham Tesco. We are dressed in crime of scene suits and have a cardboard cut-out corpse on the pavement in front of us. We are collecting signatures supporting tax justice and giving out information about the cuts and tax avoiding companies. Tesco tries to move us on, but we are having none of it and, quite literally, we freeze to the spot....it seems like hours!! There was a great picture and article in the Lynn News too which I treasure and now even more for a great and fearless comrade and friend."

And finally, a lovely comment from Jim Waters: "One of the nicest most principled people I have known"

Of course, passion, commitment, and belief can also, as was the case with Vic, make someone appear arrogant, opinionated, and volatile. He was a man, after all, not a saint!

Because of Vic's commitment to his local community – he was on the parish council – life was very much centred around home. He and Jenny did enjoy some holidays abroad, but most of Vic's pleasures were simple ones, such as sharing a glass of red wine with friends, playing his guitar, and also teaching Ben to play.

He had no choice but to slow down following his heart bypass operation some years ago, and enjoyed watching Westerns on television. But he always remained a proud Scot and Socialist. No-one ever had to wonder what Vic Martin stood for.

The following poem by Brian Bilston is called As I Grow Old I Will March, Not Shuffle. It is written for a political activist who lived to a great age. Whilst this was sadly not the case for Vic, this poem could have been written for him.

POEM: As I Grow Old I Will March, Not Shuffle by Brian Bilston

As I grow old

I will not shuffle to the beat

of self-interest

and make that slow retreat

to the right.

I will be a septuagenarian insurrectionist

marching with the kids. I shall sing

'La Marseillaise', whilst brandishing

homemade placards that proclaim
'DOWN WITH THIS SORT OF THING'.

I will be an octogenarian obstructionist,
and build unscalable barricades
from bottles of flat lemonade,
tartan blankets and chicken wire.
I will hurl prejudice upon the brazier's fire.

I will be a nonagenarian nonconformist,
armed with a ballpoint pen
and a hand that shakes with rage not age
at politicians' latest crimes,
in strongly-worded letters to The Times.

I will be a centenarian centurion
and allow injustice no admittance.
I will stage longstanding sit-ins.
My mobility scooter and I
will move for no-one.

And when I die
I will be the scattered ashes
that attach themselves to the lashes
and blind the eyes
of racists and fascists.