

**LONDON ASSEMBLY – 26 JUNE 2002**

Mayor's Statement and Questions thereon:

KEN LIVINGSTONE: Thank you very much, Trevor. Can I say that there have been some comments in the press over the last few days saying that I am angry that the Assembly has called a meeting or I think that you have handled yourself wrongly. Can I say I think that both you and the Assembly have performed absolutely the duty that Londoners would expect and I have not had any point of disagreement with the convening of this meeting and I welcome the fact that we have a chance to clear the air on this. Last week I made a statement to the London Assembly in which I dealt with three allegations which could be said to affect my role as Mayor. These allegations were that I manhandled my partner Emma Beal, that I assaulted Robin Hedges, that I left the scene of an accident before the emergency services arrived. My statement made it clear that these allegations are untrue. I reaffirm to you today unequivocally the truth of the statement I made to you last week. I understand the Assembly has been recalled to consider, in the light of new statements by Mr Hedges, the veracity of my comments to the Assembly last week and whether Greater London Authority resources were used improperly.

Following last week's meeting of the London Assembly, Mr Hedges, contradicting his earlier account of events in an interview in the Evening Standard, has cast doubt on my statement to the Assembly. Mr Hedges' new account rested upon statements which he attributed to Kate Beal, Emma Beal and another guest at the party, Mike Furniss.

First the allegation that I manhandled my partner Emma Beal. This assertion is the most personally distressing lie of the whole Evening Standard campaign. It is totally untrue. Emma Beal has issued the following statement: "At no point did Ken and I scuffle, nor did he manhandle me or frogmarch me, or in any way physically abuse me at that time or at any other time in our relationship." Kate Beal has also written to the Evening Standard stating that quotes attributed to her, suggesting that I might have mistreated Emma, are untrue. The Evening Standard has refused to print this letter.

Second, the allegation that I assaulted Mr Hedges. Mr Hedges' account rests this allegation on comments he attributes to Kate Beal, Emma's sister, and Mike Furniss. Mike Furniss and Kate Beal, along with Emma Beal, wrote to the Evening Standard on 20th June refuting the comments they are alleged to have made. They wrote to the Evening Standard, and I quote: "The Evening Standard's story today has attributed a number of statements to us, none of which is true." The Evening Standard has refused to print this letter. The Metropolitan Police have now twice interviewed Mr Hedges and confirmed that he is not making criminal allegations. Even the Evening Standard now seems to have dropped its original allegation that I assaulted Mr Hedges.

Finally the Evening Standard alleged twice in its article on 14th June that I disappeared before the arrival of the police. Again, this is not true. The source of the Evening Standard's allegation is the next door neighbour, Stuart Williams, who was not at the party. Mr Williams' account is riddled with inaccuracies. The Standard originally quotes him as saying: "Ken disappeared about five minutes before the police arrived. I had heard a guy saying to him, 'Come on Ken, let's get out of here'." However yesterday, when asked on television if I had left before the police and ambulance arrived, he said, and I quote, again: "I do not know. He might have been inside." Robin Hedges, in his account in the Standard, says: "Kate Beal later told me that when the police came Emma was inside." As I said in my statement to the Assembly last week Emma and I left together after the police and ambulance had arrived.

Now, I have made it a rule over the last 20 years never to comment about my private life, although I have been sorely tempted to do so. I am going to break that rule now by telling the Assembly exactly what happened at this party. I do not anticipate this is going to set a precedent for further comment on any stories that may appear about my private life.

I went to a party where I had three glasses of wine. By 10 o'clock I was feeling tired, as I often do at parties, and I slept till 1 o'clock. I got up at 1 o'clock, I had two dances with Emma, and then somebody accused her of having smoked a cigarette and we had a row. We went out into the street rather than have the row inside the house. After a minute or two we said, "Let's go home, the party is effectively over for us". We then went inside where Emma collected her bag and her coat, we then went out again.

We walked around the corner. At the point where Emma was actually reaching into her bag to get her car keys, Robin Hedges came running round the corner, waving his arms saying, "Help, help". He had been told by someone that I was attacking Emma, or presumably a row had been enlarged as it passed from person to person in the party.

He then jumped on me, technically an assault, and brought me to the ground. He then continued to try and keep me there. I struggled to get up. Emma went back into the house. Her sister Kate came out, lots of other people at the party came out, and I struggled my way back to the house. As I was going up the stairs several people were on the stairs. I got to the top of the stairs and I could still hear Robin shouting. By this time he was several feet behind me. He was either on the first step of those stairs, or he was actually at the base of the stairs, and was shouting. I looked back. As I looked back, I clearly saw, as he tried to get round the other people, he was leaning over the edge of what is a very low wall. I turned, I cannot remember whether I knocked on the door knocker or rang the bell, and within seconds I heard a woman's voice saying someone has fallen over. I did not see it. My face was turned 180 degrees away from what happened. I have not the slightest doubt that as he struggled to get up the stairs, struggling round other people, he over balanced and fell. I did not push him. Nobody pushed him. It was an accident. This is exactly the sort of thing that can happen to anybody. Robin was not motivated by malice. He had been led to believe that my argument with Emma had turned nasty, and that he had rushed out to try and intervene, to stop her. Kate Beal, who came round the corner at the time he had jumped on me, will confirm that Emma actually was standing there as he jumped on me. I feel no malice towards Robin because he was motivated solely by desire to protect his oldest and closest friend. It was a mistake on his part. He has suffered terribly from that, not just the physical pain, the cancelled holiday but, I suspect, unrelenting and totally unacceptable media pressure on someone who should be left to recover.

The position in all of this is that I suspect that the incident should have occupied a paragraph in the Islington Gazette, under a small headline "Man Falls at Party". Londoners will ask themselves, as I am sure will the Assembly: does that incident justify four full front pages of the Evening Standard, two double page spreads, and several other articles which have been extremely free with the facts? The weasel words of the Standard's libel lawyers inserted here and there with "alleged" and so on does not hide the fact that the Evening Standard set out to characterise this as my having pushed Robin over a wall.

The two basic sets of statements in the papers are from Mr Williams, the next door neighbour, and Robin. On their first account on 31st May they refer to an anonymous neighbour who merely announces that he was woken by the thud of someone falling. There are only two flats where that could have happened: the ground floor flat and the basement flat. I am told by Kate Beal that the basement flat was unoccupied all weekend. So we assume therefore that this is Mr Williams' first comment on the events. And nothing in that would give me any cause for concern. Two weeks later Mr Williams, by this time named, has developed total recall of all conversations he heard, even though

he admits that in an incident that lasted eight to ten minutes at most, he went in and out of his bed three times. Whether this would stand up in court, and anyone who saw him on the TV yesterday would realise that his recall is not quite as perfect as the Standard made out. Then we have the change between what Robin said to the Standard on 31st May, the statement he put out after he saw and after he had said to Emma, "I did not say these things". And then what he said on 20th June after my statement to you. Once again Robin, who claims to have been unconscious through most of this, has also developed perfect recall.

I do not blame Robin and I do not blame Stuart Williams. I think both people have been put under relentless pressure, and we all know the game of journalists, who will ask a question to which you may say "no" or "yes", and then they put into your mouth the actual question they have asked. I feel that the conduct of the Standard in this event has been a disgrace. It could have occurred to the editor, Veronica Wadley, when she first heard this story that it might be out of character. In the 21 years that I have been in the focus of public attention and unrelenting media attention there has never been a single story linking me to violence or linking me to drunkenness. If Max Hastings was still the editor he might have paused and considered whether there should have been some more detailed investigation before they ran with this story. Having run with the story, they consistently tried to justify it. We are told in the article on 14th June that Evening Standard reporters had recreated the events of the evening. Well, recreated -- I hope they never have to do any recreation on anybody surgically, because I have to say this: in their first account on 31st May they described Robin Hedges as falling 12 feet over a wall. Two weeks later this has become 15 feet over a wall. Well, the laws of physics will need to be rewritten, I felt. So yesterday at lunch time, in my own time, I got the train to Tufnell Park, I took my own tape measure and I measured this miraculous wall, this wall that could be the eighth wonder of the world. It is ten feet tall. Now, I can understand a reporter may make a mistake of ten feet being twelve if you are not measuring it. But who took the decision in the Standard in that fortnight to change the height of the wall? And if the London evening paper cannot get the height of the wall accurate to within 50 percent, why should we trust anything else they write? If we are told by the editor of the Evening Standard that this is a careful reconstruction of events, you would assume that on the simple basic physical facts that have been measured they might have actually gone and done it. So, I really do look forward to hearing later on in the later editions of the paper today about the miraculous events of this wall.

The truth is editors have more power than any Cabinet minister. They have the power to besmirch a reputation and end a career. Now, that power should only be used with the greatest restraint. I think Londoners and the Assembly have a right to say: was that the case in this instance? I believe Veronica Wadley was reckless with the facts and malicious with that power. For five weeks we have had the Evening Standard trying to bring my mayoralty to an end, to ruin my reputation, and hopefully, from their view point, force me into resignation. Fortunately for me, Londoners decide who is Mayor, not editors, or I would not have been in this position in the first place. Finally I just want to say this: I think we need several answers. Why is it the Evening Standard has still not printed the letter they received from Women's Aid when they carried the story saying Woman's Aid had attacked me and quoting somebody called Rosemary Jackson. I have here the letter sent to the editor of the Evening Standard on June 20th from Nicola Harwin, the director of Women's Aid. In it she says:

"In fact Rosemary Jackson is a voluntary member of Luton Women's Aid, a local refugee service outside London, which is a member of Women's Aid national network of domestic violence services. She was telephoned by an Evening Standard reporter, whose name was Sharon, on the evening of Sunday 16th June. Rosemary has confirmed that she suggested the reporter should be contacting a London representative of Women's Aid rather than herself. Rosemary insists that she spoke only generally about how to tackle domestic violence, and not in relation to any individual. Rosemary denies calling for the Mayor's resignation."

Why has the Evening Standard not published that letter or any of the others that I refer to? Why have they not published the letter they received from Kate, Emma and Mike Furniss denying the words put in their mouth in the article quoting Robin Hedges?

I want also to have an undertaking for the Evening Standard that Robin is not going to be victimised in this. He made a mistake. He was not malicious. And I hope we are not going to see him now made the scapegoat as the Evening Standard story collapses.

Also, given the hypocrisy of some journalists claiming that a concern here is for Emma, I would like to say that those photographers and camera men who stayed outside my front door this morning to get a picture of her are harassing her, and nobody who is pregnant should be subject to that. I want them to stop pestering us. I left the house, I was happy to be photographed as I did so. I want them to leave Emma alone.

Finally I would just like to thank Londoners because I have got used to the fact that I do not worry too much what is in the paper, I worry about what Londoners say to me. And over the last five weeks, increasingly as time has worn on, it is Londoners who have stopped me on the Tube and on the street to tell me they do not believe what they read in the Standard, and I have their support. And I thank them. It has been very important getting through a very difficult period.

I also say this to Veronica Wadley: this is not acceptable journalism and until we can have a proper answer from Veronica Wadley about how this story grew in the telling, I will not believe what I read in the Standard, and I simply warn Londoners now: don't believe anything you read about my policies or my private life in this paper until it has got a new editor. Thank you very much, Trevor.

TREVOR PHILLIPS: Thank you very much, Mr Mayor. Are there any questions on this part of the statement?

BOB NEILL: Chairman, may I suggest in fact that it might better serve everyone if we were to hear the second part of the Mayor's statement before deciding what questions, if any, are appropriate, having got the whole picture as to the matters that have been raised.

TREVOR PHILLIPS: I think we consent to that. Would you like to continue?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: The Evening Standard has alleged that GLA officials put pressure on Mr Hedges to make his original statement. This is entirely untrue. At no time have I, or any GLA official, spoken to Mr Hedges since the evening of the accident. Emma Beal did speak to Mr Hedges in her capacity as one of his oldest and best friends, and they agreed a statement after a series of conversations made on Emma Beal's personal mobile phone. Simon Fletcher was present for part of one of these phone calls, but not any of the others. The statement that was agreed with Robin was given to me by Emma. I contacted my Chief of Staff and told him to give it to the GLA press office for release. It has been suggested by the Evening Standard that even though they asked the GLA press office for my response, the GLA press office releasing this statement was a misuse of GLA resources. This is not the case. It was a lawful and proper use of the press office to release Mr Hedges' statement because it was relevant to an allegation which, if true, could be said to bring the mayoralty into disrepute. This has been confirmed by the GLA legal team and leading counsel. I have taken legal advice on this from leading counsel. I have been advised there is nothing unlawful in the Greater London Authority disclosing information in its possession which related to allegations which, if true, might be said to bring the office of Mayor into disrepute.

TREVOR PHILLIPS: Thank you. Mr Ollerenshaw?

ERIC OLLERENSHAW: Can I just thank the Mayor for that very long and detailed explanation. I am extremely grateful for it. I have only got one question, really, Ken. Are you going to sue the Standard?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: I am not going to sue the Standard. I made the mistake of getting involved in a legal action 22 years ago because I was jointly liable, along with Ted Knight, the then leader of Lambeth Council, when Private Eye alleged that we had a numbered Swiss bank account into which Colonel Gaddafi had put a quarter of a million dollars. Two years later we arrived in court, and on the day before the court appearance the Private Eye lawyers said, "We have got this statement withdrawing the allegation and we will give you five thousand pounds". My libel lawyer then said, "Well, you have got to accept this. Because if you go into court, even if you win, if the jury awards you one penny less than this, you have to pay the costs of all parties". And whilst the libel laws have occasionally, I think, been used by politicians as a stream of untaxed income, my broad view on this is you should ignore the bulk of press comment and I have broadly lived with it. I am a politician. It is part of the rules of the game. I just get upset when it is my family and my close friends who end up in the crossfire.

TREVOR PHILLIPS: Mr Neill?

BOB NEILL: I quite understand your distress at family and close friends being involved. You have made the point about the apparent discrepancy and growth in detail between accounts that were given in first newspaper reports and subsequent ones. In hindsight, do you feel it might have been better to have given us the detailed statement that you have today when you came before the Assembly on 19th June?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: Well, I just have had this policy of not commenting on my private life. I have had some pretty grim allegations over the years. And I regret I had to break it in this case. It has taken four full front-page stories in the Evening Standard, but they should not assume this is a precedent and I will give in again.

BOB NEILL: What you are making quite clear to the Assembly is that this is not one of those incidents where there is scope for confusion or misunderstanding. These are outright lies, there is no argument about that. Allegations which if true, and I appreciate what you have said, would clearly be allegations of disgraceful conduct.

KEN LIVINGSTONE: It was because the allegations, those three in particular, went over into, what frankly would be unacceptable behaviour by a Mayor, I felt you had to have my assurance they were untrue. I did not want to go into the details then and I regret I have to go into the details now.

BOB NEILL: I understand that because it is common ground between all of us, not just the behaviour, which would be disgraceful, but the suggestion of putting pressure on someone to change a statement and put out something false, would be disgraceful and misleading the Assembly, which was implicit. You have made your position clear as far as that is concerned. Can you just help me about this: given that Mr Hedges, I think you were quoted in the press, was in a vulnerable situation, would he have been better perhaps to have got some third party to have dealt with the press enquiries on his behalf?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: You have to bear in mind that Robin and Emma have been close friends for years. They have occasionally gone on holiday together. Part of the problem is this was the final edition of the Evening Standard, so there was a mad rush at the end of the day. When that appeared, it is inevitable that Emma would phone and say, "What is going on? Are you all right?" And so on.

And to actually point out to him, having said these things, if he had said these things, he was going to be pestered relentlessly over the weekend by every other paper, which is actually what happened to all of us. It would be better, given that he said to Emma at that stage he had not said these things, these were words that had been put into his mouth by the Evening Standard, it would be better to put out a statement simply trying to kill the story at that stage. But this is a best friend helping their other best friend --two best friends basically.

BOB NEILL: I have only two short and final points. From my understanding of what you have said, no one other than your partner and your Chief of Staff -- from the GLA's offices or contacts -- had any involvement in the words that were actually in Mr Hedge's initial statement?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: To put this in perspective, when we first had the press office phone to say that they had an enquiry that there had been a fracas at a party, I think that was the term they used, I did not assume there was any great problem with this. I was actually on my way for a swim and I did not feel any need to interrupt my swim. By the time I got back we had seen the front page. By that stage Emma had talked to Robin and the statement had emerged. He actually said, "That is fine". It was emerging. I then overheard her conversation to Robin and it was the conversation of a friend helping somebody else through a difficult time. It was not browbeating them.

BOB NEILL: I wonder who drew up the words that appear in that first statement?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: I may have had an input. It is difficult to remember -- between Emma, myself, what Robin was saying. We agreed it, we changed it over the phone, a conversation must have gone on for half an hour. And what was agreed at the end, he had actually completely agreed to.

BOB NEILL: Did you speak to Mr Hedges yourself on the phone?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: No no, I was there while listening to the conversation. I did not speak to Mr Hedges.

BOB NEILL: I only ask that because there is a report in the Press Association referring to this which carries a direct quote from you, apparently, to be in these terms asking if it was you who told your office to put out the statement and you said, of course it was, which you confirmed to us. And you are quoted in direct speech as saying, "Robin was recovering. He could not handle the press directly." I said "Do you want us to put this out?" And he said yes, which gives the impression of a direct conversation.

KEN LIVINGSTONE: No, that is not. That would have been a conversation relayed via Emma.

TOBY HARRIS: First of all Mr Mayor can I thank you for the very full statements that you have made and the detail into which you have gone and I hope that it is not necessary for you, or indeed any or politician, to have to go into such detail about such matters in the future. As you will no doubt be aware lots of people around and about are busy speculating as to what may or may not have gone on at the party. And you have given a very clear indication. Much of that speculation has not found its way into newspapers. But clearly one of things that I have heard said is that the issue that caused the row between you and your partner was about drug use. Now I would be grateful if you would just confirm the situation on that and clarify your normal practice about such matters.

KEN LIVINGSTONE: Well, there were no drugs at this party. Sometimes reading the press you assume some sort of Roman orgy was taking place in Islington. The reality is -- I think the age range of people at the party was 35 to 78 and the mood of the party reflected that age range. There were no drugs. It was basically an old friends and family get together and I am happy to say that

absolutely no drugs were involved at all. I should also say that the allegation that Emma had had a cigarette turned out to be totally false. Emma has been exemplary in not smoking since before she became pregnant and I think one of the most offensive things which papers, who have no way of knowing, have characterised her as smoking and puffing away when in actual fact she has been absolutely determined not to do anything that endangers her baby. Also she has never had a nicotine patch on her arm, another great invention by media, nor were there crates of vodka being taken in. I had three glasses of Sauvignon Blanc.

TOBY HARRIS: I hope it was of reasonable quality.

KEN LIVINGSTONE: It was, it was.

TOBY HARRIS: Clearly the last few weeks have been enormously diverting in terms of your time and energy, in terms certainly of distraction. This has been a period when you have been launching the draft Spatial Development Strategy. Can you give us some indication of the extent to which have you have been occupied in dealing with these matters when perhaps you might have been dealing with the business of London?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: Well, not a lot until Mr Hedges' statement last Thursday. I just basically ignore this stuff. If you ignore it usually no one can remember it a week later. It was only when Robin's statement last week directly challenged the assurances I had given to the Assembly that it moved pretty much to the front of my thinking where it has been since. It has not interrupted too much of the daily work it has basically been there when I have been lying in bed at night thinking of what I was going to say to you this week. It has clearly not helped the launch of the Spatial Development Strategy. I would like to think one day London will have an evening paper that might devote full front page leads four times running to our Spatial Development Strategy, and a couple of double page spreads. I think you only have to say what would have happened if Max Hastings was still editing this paper. This might have been a paragraph or two inside and then dispensed as an irrelevance and I think that is the tragedy. We got very used to the Evening Standard being a really important paper for London and I have to say this last month I have begun to doubt whether that is the case.

GRAHAM TOPE: Can I thank you Mr Mayor for being so frank with us today. I understand why you do not want to sue, for libel presumably, the Evening Standard. Have you considered referring it to the Press Complaints Commission?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: Well I have had a couple of experiences with them too which does not fill me with confidence. The last one was when I was on holiday in Cuba and a couple of papers followed me using telephoto lenses, and I know you have all seen the pictures and passed them around -- the highlight of a rather dull meeting. I remember getting a nice letter from Lord Wakeham before his demise saying that I had to accept that it was of legitimate public interest issue where I went on holiday. Basically if you have large tracts of land on which you holiday you cannot be photographed on those but your private estate may give you security, for those who have got them, but going on holiday does not so frankly I consider the Press Complaints Commission completely toothless.

At the end of the day Londoners will judge and I am quite happy that that should be the case. They will judge what they read in the papers and they will say does this accord with what we think based on what we hear him say on radio and TV.

GRAHAM TOPE: This is not the time for us to debate the effectiveness of the Press Complaints Commission but you have said this morning, again, that the behaviour of the Evening Standard was, I think the word you use was a "disgrace". I think it is qualitatively different to taking pictures of you in your swimming trunks on a beach which demonstrably was of interest to some of the female Londoners, around this table anyway. That is qualitatively different to what we are here debating this morning. Are you actually saying that you believe the Evening Standard to have acted disgracefully and all the other epithets you have used and yet you are going to take no action of any sort about that?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: I have said what I think here and Londoners will make up their minds. I really do not want to waste any more time preparing long written statements to the Press Complaints Commission and rebuttals on what the Evening Standard do. My advice to Londoners is-- I can not remember who first thought of this quote -- "do not buy the papers it only encourages them." They may very well wish to apply this stricture to the Evening Standard for a little while.

GRAHAM TOPE: This may be one of the Evening Standard's problems at the moment. You welcomed, or you were quoted as welcoming, the possibility of a police investigation to clear it all up. Would you welcome an investigation by the Standards Board for the same reason.

KEN LIVINGSTONE: I have now said what happened at the party. I am happy to let Londoners be the judge of that. Basically the police would have been quite good at investigating this because they are used to taking lots of conflicting statements from people who have been at things at 1 o'clock in the morning. They have got a skill at it. It could have resolved it quite early but unless someone makes a complaint they were not going to do that. I am not saying it is a good use of police time at the present time to be worrying about whether or not what goes in the Standard was correct. I am happy now to leave it.

GRAHAM TOPE: The police will be investigating, or not investigating as it happens, whether or not any criminal actions took place. As you know very well the code of conduct applies regardless of whether an alleged act was criminal or otherwise. I would just suggest to you that it is likely to run on and on because I do not doubt that either later today or by tomorrow the Evening Standard will be doing what it did last week and suggesting that what you said to us this morning is not the truth or the whole truth and so on. It will just run on and on and it seems to me certainly that the Standards Board is the body set up to investigate, if it chooses to, if it decides there is something necessary to investigate, to do so independently, objectively and make a decision which Londoners and everybody else will accept whatever that may be.

KEN LIVINGSTONE: I think Londoners made up their mind pretty much before I even made this statement. Last week the Evening Standard held back what I had said to you to the final edition, whereas it could have been in the previous three editions. There was no great rush to communicate the news to Londoners there and then. Unlike other papers, which did actually print my statement in full, they chopped bits of it up and put in their own editorial comment. So I am not really holding my breath to see what they write this afternoon nor do I terribly much care anymore.

GRAHAM TOPE: No, I understand your feelings about the Evening Standard. I think we probably all do. But do you not feel you owe it to the office of Mayor of London and not just Ken Livingstone, but to the office of Mayor of London actually to take some action to close this matter down one way or the other; to actually lance the boil and to deal with it rather than just let it run on for as long as the Evening Standard, or anyone else for that matter, wishes it to run on.

KEN LIVINGSTONE: I think if the Evening Standard want to run on with it, let them. I think it will contribute to their present falling sales. We have had a meeting of the London Assembly and it has

been broadcast live. What tribunal is going to be better than this actually? Are we really going to say that the Standards Board or police or someone else should now go back to people to try and remember what happened at 1.30 in the morning five or six weeks ago? I can tell you now there will not be much agreement amongst participants, inevitably. Part of the problem was this: we could have had all had to make statements immediately when the police turned up - the police were there within minutes. Instead they immediately talked to Robin who told them it was an accident. No one at that party came forward to say anything else. They immediately proceeded on that basis. I think that the police dealt with it properly at the beginning. If the Standard want to carry on running with that it is up to them. I am not going to waste much more of my time on it if any.

GRAHAM TOPE: Did you speak to the police or to the ambulance men?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: I think actually by the time I left the police may actually have left the scene and the ambulance people were dealing with it. There were the blue flashing lights and all of that, there were men in white shirts, they could have been police, they could have been ambulance. It did not seem to me there was anything to say. There had been an accident. He had fallen over.

GRAHAM TOPE: You said just now that if any Standards Board or for that matter the police were to speak to people at the party there will be different recollections, different stories, different statements. Earlier on you actually - when you describe them as outright liars - you said there was no scope for confusion. Now you are suggesting that, I think quite rightly, that at 1.30 in a party a month ago there is scope for confusion because people have different recollections. And I come back to the point, does this not need to be resolved rather than just let to run on and run on?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: There is no scope for confusion on the three central issues that matter, ie I did not leave the party before the police and ambulance arrived, I did not assault Emma and I did not push Robin over the thing either intentionally or accidentally. I am sure there will be all sorts of details about who was on the stairs and the exact timings of all of this and how many times Mr Williams got in and out of bed. I do not think it is going to advance the some total of human knowledge about this incident, which one has to say has received more coverage than any other event in the Evening Standard except for September 11th. And given what is happening in the world one has to question the news values of an editor who has decided to actually devote so much of their paper to this.

DARREN JOHNSON: Thank you very much for the detailed statement. I did suggest to the other Assembly Members yesterday that we actually get you and Emma to act out a reconstruction, Crimewatch style, but they were not too keen on that although it transpires we got a very detailed statement from you anyway. Do you expect your readmission to the Labour Party to proceed smoothly now?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: I have to say I do not think it has any bearing on it what so ever. Literally I see some more comments in the papers today but this is a matter for the Labour Party to decide. I certainly was not thinking of my admission or otherwise to the Labour Party on the night of the party.

DARREN JOHNSON: It has not put you off reapplying then?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: No, no, no. Not at all. I would say I do think it is getting a bit wide of the original summons.

MIKE TUFFREY: Thank you chair. Attention is focussed on the 18th and 19th May. I actually think we should be focussing on the 19th June when you came and voluntarily gave us a statement essentially on the assault, the man handling, and disappearing trick. You denied those but the

position we are faced with today is that there are others who are saying other things. Now if they are telling the truth you are lying to us. It is very difficult for us to form a judgment of that. We are not, as my colleague has said, a kangaroo court. That is why our view from the Liberal Democrat side is that this matter should go to the Standards Board and I would first of all ask you whether you will cooperate fully with that should that happen?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: If any of you wish to refer to the Standards Board and they want to investigate it I would be happy to turn up and answer all their questions. But I have to say I am not certain how well equipped they are to deal with this either, frankly. I think the Standards Board was set up for those politicians likely to dip their hand in the till rather than to investigate parties in Islington at 1 o'clock in the morning.

MIKE TUFFREY: Effectively people are saying that you are lying to us and that matter should be investigated.

KEN LIVINGSTONE: The good news you have got is that the statement I made last week I stand by. I have not changed a sentence or a subclause. What we clearly have here is the two main people disagreeing with me. Mr Williams in his original anonymous comments in the Evening Standard makes no reference at all to what he then said two weeks later when he developed perfect recall. Mr Robin Hedges has of course changed, I think under pressure from the Evening Standard. I do say I do not want him now victimised by this -- he has changed his line. I will not be changing what I said to you last week or this week whoever else is interviewing me or questioning me.

MIKE TUFFREY: The second thing that you did on June 19th was to up the ante and turn this into a question of media ethics. Certainly I would have some sympathy with what you say in terms of Londoners wanting to see the back of this and getting to the bottom of it. But you have chosen to raise this to one of media ethics but are refusing then to take the two obvious routes open to you; one is the Press Complaints Committee and the other is to sue. Would you accept that Londoners who would like to get to the bottom of this would find it somewhat incredible, you having raised the ante, then not following it through?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: Well I am not going to put at risk some quarter of a million pounds in some legal case that most likely would not even be resolved before the next Mayoral election. As I say I have no great confidence in the Press Complaints Commission any more than I had in its predecessor body. I suspect Londoners have got enough information now: they have seen page after page in the Evening Standard, they have heard my account of this, they have heard the rival accounts. I am happy to leave it to them to come to a conclusion on all of this. People did say to me that it was unwise to be critical of a newspaper editor, particularly when that one has a monopoly in the city in which you are Mayor. It does seem to me that when people have great power and they use it as badly as Veronica Whadley has done you need to stand up to them and not hope that if you keep quiet they will not do it again. I am certain she will do it again and I am certain Londoners will view further attacks by the Evening Standard on me in the light of what has just been happening in the last few weeks.

JENNY JONES: I would just like to point out to the Lib Dems that you need some evidence before you refer the Mayor to the Standards Board for England and evidence is exactly what we do not have. Now short of evidence from other people who were at the party, short of the Archbishop of Canterbury coming and saying: I was at the party and I saw it, then we simply do not have evidence to refer the Mayor to the Standards Board for England.

KEN LIVINGSTONE: I will tell you this one thing. You could put us all on a polygraph machine and then see. I will be happy to be on a polygraph machine and say what I just said to all of you. Whether all the others will is another matter.

BOB NEILL: Can you help us? Who called the police?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: I have not a clue.

BOB NEILL: Do you know why the police were called?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: Well, I read it in the Evening Standard so it may not necessarily be true but it said in the Evening Standard --

BOB NEILL: We are interested in your answer.

KEN LIVINGSTONE: -- that the police were called by the ambulance service as they automatically are when there has been an accident. Whether that is true I do not know.

BOB NEILL: It is not from any fight as far as you are concerned that would have triggered the call?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: Well, Robin did jump on me. To characterise it as a fight I think would be over doing it. He has no more pugilistic training or skills than I have. Until he fell off the thing neither of us had actually suffered any great damage.

GRAHAM TOPE: You made the point that Londoners can judge. Well that judgment depends on who they believe, does it not?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: Yes.

GRAHAM TOPE: And we are not, as is observed, in a position or are equipped to make that judgment. We are agreed about that. Given the gravity of the behaviour by the Evening Standard that you suggest -- it cannot really get much more serious can it - your allegations about the paper? And you agree too that if the allegation were well founded you could not continue in office could you? Against that background do you still not think it could be best for an independent body better equipped than us be it the Press Complaints Commission, Standards Board or whatever to look at the matter?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: Any member of this authority can ask the new Standards Board to conduct an investigation. Whether the Standards Board which has just been set up wants this to establish the sort of precedents and ground rules for its future work I very much doubt frankly. That is up to you. If you wish to ask them to investigate I am sure they will.

BOB NEILL: Or alternatively, you could reflect upon your previous experience with the courts and conclude that perhaps a jury in a defamation action might be able to come to a view, given in mind that the qualitative difference as Graham Tope observes is worlds apart here, is it not? This is not the paparazzi, these are not the fantasies of Private Eye. If this is right this is a concerted abuse of power by the media or on the other hand an abuse of office by you. Why not litigate that?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: It is an abuse of power by one paper. What all the other papers have done - I think the Mail dug in a bit - is broadly repeat the Evening Standard's articles. This is why all the other papers got the height of the wall wrong as well. The reality is Londoners have heard the statements of all of us, they have seen them extensively reported in the press. The only thing that a court hearing would bring is a lot of lawyers making a lot of money and point scoring over it. I am quite happy to trust seven and a half million Londoners to read it for themselves and come to their own decisions. That is the biggest jury you are going to find.

LYNNE FEATHERSTONE: You come over as Mr Innocent in this and I thank you for that explanation. If you are not prepared to sue the Evening Standard or take what would be the obvious step then I suppose, in the court of your conscience, do you feel that there was anything in your behaviour that has brought this authority into disrepute and do you feel there is anything you should apologise to London for?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: I am sorry that I believed somebody when they told me that Emma had had a cigarette when this was not true and there is that element. I am sorry we did not get to the car 20 seconds earlier because we would have been gone, Robin would have gone back into the party and there would not have been this huge waste of everybody's time as this media drama unfurled. But the reality is an accident like this can happen at any time. For most people however they do not have the Evening Standard hovering over it like a hyena gorging on it.

LYNNE FEATHERSTONE: There was absolutely nothing in your behaviour that you regret?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: No no, not at all.

LYNNE FEATHERSTONE: Okay.

GRAHAM TOPE: I just wanted to respond to one of the points that Jenny Jones made and go back to the question of the Standards Board. Jenny said you have to have evidence to do this. May I just say that the Evening Standard says that it has evidence and it does not have to be a member of this Assembly that refers to the Standards Board. Any member of the public and for that matter the editor of the Evening Standard in this particular case can refer it to the Standards Board, and I return to them and that is what I wish that they would do so that the matter can be dealt with independently, objectively and resolved once and for all. Otherwise I do believe that it is going to hang around for the next two years. Hopefully not every day on the headlines but it is going to be brought up over and over again. I think that it should be resolved in the interests of Londoners and frankly in the interests of the office of Mayor as well.

KEN LIVINGSTONE: We can go around all of this. I actually think Londoners will make up their own mind. They are a jury and a pretty big one.

TREVOR PHILLIPS: I think that is it. Is there anything else you would like to say Ken?

KEN LIVINGSTONE: No.

TREVOR PHILLIPS: Well you know you have never been known to miss an opportunity before so I just thought I would check. Thank you very much, Mr Mayor. Now before we do anything else I would like to put it to the Members: is there any Member who wishes to move a motion, procedural or otherwise? No. Well, let me just say at the end of this that it is interesting when other democratic chambers seem less and less relevant and less likely to address an issue of major importance, I am glad that the London Assembly has been able to deal with, in what I think is a grown up way, a very difficult issue which is of interest to all Londoners. So thank you colleagues and thank you Mr Mayor. That closes this meeting.