

Interview with Alan Brooks by Christabel Gurney on 23 August 2005, reproduced on the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee Forward to Freedom project website <http://www.aamarchives.org/>

Christabel Gurney: Can you say briefly how you came to join the staff of the Anti-Apartheid Movement?

Alan Brooks: I was deported from South Africa in June 1966, having been a political prisoner there for nearly two years. One of my first impressions of the Movement was at a Trafalgar Square rally which was held in early July 1966, when Ethel [de Keyser] invited me up onto the plinth along with the VIPs. I was astonished by the multi-racial character of the crowd, because of course I had never seen anything like that in South Africa, and in Britain it seemed to be taken as quite a normal thing. I was co-opted, I think, onto the National Committee, but I then wasn't in London a great deal because I went to the University of Sussex for a year. But on completion of my course there in the summer of '67 I got involved in discussions with Vella Pillay and Abdul Minty about working for the Movement and I was appointed its Organising Secretary round about September 1967. I had four responsibilities: one was for the trade unions, one was for students, the third was for local groups and the fourth was speaker meetings. The first three fitted together well, because I would fairly frequently travel to the main cities and try to contact sympathetic trade unionists, speak at student meetings or help students to set up meetings on Southern Africa, and try to give support to our local groups which were very varied in character.

CG: How much support did AAM have, for example, from people who had set up local groups?

AB: It's hard to generalise about the local groups. You wouldn't have recognised then the places that came to be really strong centres of the Movement, like Sheffield, Bristol and so on. I formed several impressions. One was that the local group, if it was predominantly made up of South African exiles, was going to be inactive and ineffective at getting British support. The Manchester group was typical of that. The Secretary was a Labour Party woman activist who despaired of the South Africans around her because every time they met all they wanted to do was to talk about South Africa, of which they knew a great deal – several of them were academics. And they were so inward looking they turned off the British people who might have got involved.

CG: But why was the [Manchester AA] Secretary involved? Why did British people get involved? Was there any pattern?

AB: That's hard to say. In general the key British activists were either left Labour or Communist Party people – and in some cases they had been one and had become the other. For example, Margaret Stanton in Birmingham. In Liverpool our local chap was an ex-docker called Les Perrington. I quickly discovered he was not only Mr Anti-Apartheid – he was also Mr CND, Mr Peace Movement and so on. Every issue that came up, he went down the pub and passed the hat around among his equally revolutionary docker mates – and that was it. But he had no capacity or time for building an anti-apartheid movement. In Scotland things were broader based, a mix of academics, one or two trade unionists, church people and so on.

CG: Was there more church involvement in Scotland?

AB: That's my impression at that time. I also discovered to my surprise that there was some resistance to my travels. One year I went to several of our local groups about six weeks ahead of our AGM – it seemed to me to be an important thing to do. I wanted to drum up interest in the annual general meeting and encourage more participation. But when I got back I was quite sharply criticised by Abdul [Minty] for not having been in the office – which made me realise that more importance was attached at leadership level to the international work and the national work, instead of building a solid base. Of course, both were necessary. The student work was very uneven. One could travel right across the country and arrive at a student meeting with a guest speaker – someone from the ANC or one of the other liberation movements – and you might find that they had done no preparatory work at all, and then rushed around putting up a few posters. On the other hand, where there were committed groups they could lay on very good meetings. And then during the sports boycott issue in the winter of '69, when the South African rugby tour was playing two matches a week and virtually all the matches were played in university towns and cities, the level of student participation was huge and very important. They gave us the weight of numbers in those demonstrations and laid the foundations for the Stop the Seventy Tour campaign the following year.

CG: So would you say that at that time the Movement depended largely on students for any sort of mass presence?

AB: Yes, that was probably so. Of course there had been Paris [the events of 1968], the anti-Vietnam war movement and student activism was relatively easy to promote into solidarity activity with Southern Africa.

CG: Did the support come from student unions, that were affiliated to the NUS, or anti-apartheid groups?

AB: It seemed to depend hardly at all on the leadership of the student union concerned. It was much more a function of who the local activists were. In some places they were UNSA [United Nations Student Association] groups – very strong at Cambridge, for example. Other places it was anti-racist societies. At Reading there was a chap called Hugh Geach, active in Stop the Seventy Tour. And famously Jon Snow didn't finish his degree at Liverpool because of the anti-investment campaign, which led them to occupy a university building. Kim Howells, the former Labour Minister, helped to organise the Hornsey students sit-in. There were LSE students. So student activism was a fertile field. The trade unions were much slower work. We formed a trade union committee which later grew in strength and capacity, but in its early years was rather feeble. I think our first attempt at getting trade unionists together was a conference at Plaw Hatch, down in Sussex, a traditional trade union meeting place, where we got about 25 or 28 trade unionists for the weekend. But the TUC was hostile and John Gaetsewe, the General Secretary of SACTU,¹ arrived during this period and the TUC didn't want to meet him because he had been working for what they regarded as the enemy – the WFTU [World Federation of Trade Unions] in Prague. Many of the SACTU people had come through Eastern Europe. But there were good people, like Ken Gill in the draughtsmen's union, and some people in ASTMS.

Working in the trade unions for the AAM in the 1960s, one of the most important points of entrance – invaluable – was the trades councils. There are not many left today, but they were a very powerful force. Their value was that they were the forum of all the different trade unions in a given locality. And if you could get to speak to trades councils, get them to adopt Movement policy, that gave a potential ‘in’ to the unions who were involved in that trades council. Some of them were huge. The Birmingham Trades Council was one of the few that had full-time staff, their meetings had a 100 plus people. They were really strong local forums of the trade unions. There is still, for example, a trades council in Oxford, but then they were in all the major towns, and it was a natural point – to find someone sympathetic and get into the trades council. A lot of them were affiliated to the Movement.

CG: As far as Movement strategy went, the general impression is often given that the Anti-Apartheid Movement was anxious to stay within the law and that Stop the Seventy Tour was a grassroots movement. Was that so in practice?

AB: On the specifics of the cricket campaign [in 1970], Peter Hain was then in the Young Liberals. He was keen to do something militant, and for him being militant meant direct action. This was beginning to surface within the field of the AAM – the same debate that had cost the peace movement rather heavily – the debate between standard campaigning, marches, demonstrations, petitions, boycotts, etc. and direct action. There had been the Committee of a Hundred in the peace movement. Peter Hain got involved with a number of those people and his thinking, I think, was shaped by them. The Executive asked me and John Sprack to have a meeting with Peter Hain, which we did, but it was inconclusive. We agreed to report back and then have a further meeting. But he then launched, without previous consultation, the Stop the Seventy Tour campaign. By and large it co-existed reasonably well with the Movement. The Movement later had a preoccupation on its other flank, which was the group of anti-racist campaigners within the MCC, right in the heart of the British establishment led by a Labour Minister, Reg Prentice, I think. But there were important people in there like David Sheppard, former English cricket captain and later Bishop of Liverpool. They were a minority within the MCC, but they were trying to shift it, and we were trying to hold all these forces – from the direct action people who were digging up cricket pitches to the stuffed shirts of the cricket establishment – trying to keep them in line and together, going in the same direction, which by and large, we did, but it was difficult. I remember the period of the Christmas holidays, around New Year [1969–70], when the focus was still on the South African rugby team, which was under mounting pressure. But everybody could see that this was going to turn into the cricket issue. In that period the AAM office was completely swamped by demands for material. We were like a mail order firm at Christmas. We just spent all our time packaging up tens of thousands of leaflets, rolls of posters and so on, and getting them out to our supporters all round the country. To illustrate the fact that we could appeal to anti-racists who were Conservatives, one of our young helpers was called Douglas Blauerstein. He was a Young Tory and later became a Tory Councillor. He came as often as he could and was there for hours on end helping. Then in June that year there was the General Election – which Labour lost – and Douglas was the only person in the office who was going to vote for the Tories. We couldn’t understand and we had discussions about it – very amiable discussions – how Douglas couldn’t see that the Tories were pro-apartheid. There were always those anti-apartheid Tories, few in number but sincere, and we were able to work with them, as well as with the radical direct action people.

CG: Can you say something about NUS [National Union of Students], how its policy changed?

AB: The NUS was not at first easy to work with. It was constrained by a long history of identifying itself with the National Union of South African Students (NUSAS), which was a predominantly white liberal student body. They were allied together internationally in the ISC [International Student Conference] but things were changing, first of all in South Africa. With the introduction of apartheid in the universities, the regime had established the so-called tribal colleges. So there was an increase in the number of black students coming through.

CG: SASO was formed in 1969 ...

AB: That's part of this picture. So NUSAS was beginning to ask itself, very controversially in South Africa, whether it should try to move closer to the black students and to their political concerns instead of just reflecting the interests of the English-speaking white student body. Then the armed struggle of the ANC surfaced, together with that of ZAPU, in the Wankie campaign in August 1967. That added a new dimension. The Movement, at its AGM, immediately came in behind that. And of course there had been all the student activism in the late '60s in relation to Vietnam, the Prague spring and so on. There was a very effective lobby within the National Union of Students called the Radical Student Alliance, which was Communist-led but broader than the Communist Party. It adopted as its candidate for President of the NUS Jack Straw, who wasn't of the same mind ideologically, but he was to the left of the traditional NUS presidents who were right-wing social democrats – Geoff Martin, for example. This came to a head in an NUS conference where, against this background of changes around the world, the NUS moved way beyond its traditional support for NUSAS without reference to the broader forces at play in South Africa, and declared its support for the armed struggle and all the liberation movements – the ANC and ZANU/ZAPU, FRELIMO, MPLA and so on. And Jack Straw became President and was saddled with a policy which he personally felt was a bit too radical. But it opened the door and made work in the student unions much easier. A particular difficulty for the Movement was the differences between ZAPU and ZANU in Zimbabwe. ZAPU had made its mark in the Wankie campaign and the campaign that followed and then went very quiet. There were more ZANU-supporting students in Britain than ZAPU supporters. I remember organising some very successful student meetings for Judith Todd, the daughter of the former Southern Rhodesian Prime Minister Garfield Todd, who was a missionary and farmer. She spoke in a very well-modulated voice in front of student audiences saying 'I call on you to support the armed struggle of the Zimbabwean people led by ZAPU'. It went down well!

CG: Then you left full-time work with Anti-Apartheid and later worked with IDAF. You were on the Executive Committee for part of the intervening period before you came back to full-time work. Do you want to say anything about that period?

AB: Those were difficult years because the level of visible struggle in South Africa was so low. The ANC was struggling to establish itself on the African continent and the Movement was confronted with repeated attempts by British governments, both Labour and Tory, to strike a deal with the white minority regime in Rhodesia and recognise it with some modifications. So a great deal of our campaigning work was actually on Rhodesia for quite a long period, while continuing

with work on South African political prisoners. The issue of Namibia cropped up from time to time, with the proceedings in The Hague in the World Court and the launch of the armed struggle there. But the bulk of the Movement's campaigning work was on Rhodesia. This was important in preventing a sell-out which could easily have happened. I think the British establishment were uncomfortable with the falling out with the white settler powers in Southern Rhodesia, who had more or less been given carte blanche to run the show since the 1920s.

CG: After 1980 the nationalists did take over in what became Zimbabwe. And things changed very rapidly in South Africa in the early 1980s with the formation of the UDF in 1983 and the South African Government's attempts to bring about limited reforms, which didn't work. You came back to be the full-time Deputy Secretary of the Anti-Apartheid Movement in 1987. How had things changed?

AB: It was a different animal when I came back. The Movement had grown so much stronger. There were well-established local groups. The trade union support had much deeper roots and was much more influential in moving the trade unions into relevant solidarity – not just with the trade union movement in South Africa, but with the liberation struggle. The influence of the Movement was greater. The issues which we had struggled to get on the agenda in the '60s – sanctions and disinvestment – were now at the centre of the debate about what to do about apartheid. We battled long and hard and some specifics of those campaigns are worth remembering. The Barclays campaign, which had started in a very peculiar way – because Barclays had a marginal involvement in the Cabora Bassa dam – had become centre stage in the disinvestment campaign. It was very handy for students because Barclays, like the other high street banks, tried to recruit student accounts at the beginning of each academic year, so they were an easy target. But now the local authorities were involved. And if local authorities decided to shift away from Barclays or to move their investments from big British companies involved in Southern Africa, these were major local battles, which often took years to reach a successful conclusion. But in the course of doing that people learnt a lot about the issues and came to understand and be convinced of the need for sanctions. So it was very educational and actually the Barclays campaign was successful at the end of 1986, when they decided to pull out of South Africa. But of course there were much wider disinvestment battles to be fought, especially the mining companies like Rio Tinto Zinc in Namibia.

CG: One of the big developments of the 1980s was the way in which the Anti-Apartheid Movement became such a mass influence, partly because of the involvement of the music industry and Artists Against Apartheid. How did that happen?

AB: I wasn't closely involved in that, but Clapham Common was the first big step on the road of using the power of popular music to focus on the issues in South Africa. There was a whole series of international music events, of which Live Aid was one ...

CG: Then at the same time, sanctions had much more support from organisations like the Labour Party and the trade union, and to some extent from the churches, which had been opposed in the '60s and '70s. How did that happen?

AB: It may sound banal, but just through long hard work. In relation to the specific battles that were fought in the student unions, in local authorities, in trade unions which had banked with Barclays and had investments in companies involved in South Africa through their pension funds. These issues were being debated everywhere. The Movement as such was giving a lead and pointing in a direction, but it couldn't of itself fight all these battles around the country. It was the people who got involved who learned about issues, could see the nature of the interests that were propping up apartheid. It was very educational and that was the underlying strength of the movement for sanctions. We were, of course, up against the Thatcher Government, which was facing entirely in the wrong direction. But there was also a powerful current of right-wing liberal opinion which always argued against sanctions and disinvestment on the grounds that capital was a liberalising influence in South Africa. That was a harder argument to counter. But fortunately it didn't have the reach of the Movement's influence. It couldn't have the same reach because it was defending an entrenched position, whereas we were arguing for change and trying to bring forces into play to bring about change. They were just arguing for the status quo. And even people who were in some doubt about the need for disinvestment were not likely to stomach putting more capital into South Africa – which was where that argument led.

CG: What about Anti-Apartheid's relations with South Africans – with the liberation movements, but also in the 1980s with the UDF [United Democratic Front]?

AB: As soon as the UDF took off, we took every opportunity that came our way to meet them when they passed through London. And there were other people who were aligned with the UDF, like Frank Chikane, who was very important in influencing church people, as was Bishop Tutu. And of course we had an outstanding President in Trevor Huddleston, an anti-establishment man of the establishment – like Canon Collins in a way – a man of powerful intellect and unquestionable moral integrity, who was constantly challenging the establishment. With the ANC our relations got closer and closer. They sometimes became difficult over complex areas of policy like the cultural boycott, where there were cultural forces inside South Africa that aligned themselves with the UDF and were involved in music, theatre and so on with an anti-apartheid message. They wanted to be heard internationally. It was very difficult for the Movement to argue for a complete boycott, as it had done for some years, of South African cultural groups, when people were seeking to get platforms outside South Africa and expecting us to provide them. To some extent the ANC took a bit of the sharpness out of the picture by launching its own cultural unit [Amandla] which had a very successful period of touring Europe and elsewhere. But it was an intrinsically difficult problem and sometimes gave rise to tensions.

CG: But were the Movement's relations with the ANC close enough to enable it to discuss that?

AB: Yes, we could. It may have been subjective arrogance on our part, but we often had the feeling that we were doing the thinking for the ANC on the international front. The reason was that that was all that we had to think about. The ANC had a great deal else to think about. It had the forces in South Africa – keeping in contact with them and building mutual trust was very difficult, objectively speaking; the complexities of African politics, the insecurity of the ANC in many African countries; the fact that it was still seen by many African governments as soft on the whites, and that the PAC always exploited that to the ANC's disadvantage; the United Nations; and then its growing contacts in India and the new forces coming onto the anti-apartheid scene in

Australasia. The ANC had a great deal to do, plus its armed units and camps in Angola, lots of internal problems there. It was small wonder that they didn't spend as much time thinking about solidarity in Britain and Europe as we did. When Mike [Terry] and I had meetings with the ANC rep – in the later period that was Mendi Msimang – we would go in with an agenda of 15 to 20 items. He would have three main points that he wanted to put across to us and we would start with that. Then we would try to work our way through all our concerns, but we never got to the end. But there was a mutual trust and respect. And in the period when things really began to change in South Africa we were fortunate to be briefed, principally by Thabo Mbeki and to a lesser extent by Aziz Pahad, and occasionally by Oliver Tambo when he came through, about what was going on, what to expect and how to adjust so that we could carry the Movement into a different situation. Then when Mandela and the other prisoners were released, the liberation movements were unbanned and so on, new tensions began to arise about when sanctions should be relaxed – but I was no longer involved at that stage.

CG: In the '80s how did AAM relate to the other big players in the anti-apartheid field, like the TUC and the churches? AAM was coming from a different perspective. It had always supported the liberation movement and called for sanctions, while the TUC and the churches had their own links with South Africa and had rather different attitudes. Do you think that the AAM succeeded in pulling these forces together?

AB: It certainly pulled people together and gave leadership – often by not taking the lead itself, but by encouraging others to take the lead and helping to decide what needed to be done and what the priorities were. Here the role of the spokespeople from South Africa, from the legal movement and from the ANC itself, was complementary to ours. They would be facing in the same direction as us but bringing pressure to bear of a different sort. Of course the TUC by its nature was never going to be an enthusiastic supporter of any liberation movement, especially one engaged in armed struggle and seen to be aligned with the Soviet Union, but they were prepared to give token support whilst giving much more practical support to the growing trade union movement in South Africa. The role of South African trade unionists, those who came occasionally and those who were here in exile, was important in helping to change attitudes within the unions and ultimately within the TUC General Council. Although the General Council was led to some degree by the International Department, the International Department also had to follow what the General Council decided.

One of the difficult aspects of the Movement's life was how we related to the various anti-racist movements that developed. I particularly remember the situation after the General Election after 1987 when for the first time there were four black Labour MPs in Parliament. They couldn't form a black parliamentary caucus. As more and more black people were drawn towards the Movement, the issue of how the Movement related to anti-racist struggles was difficult. There was pressure from black activists for the Movement to take on racism in British society, which by and large the leadership of the Movement resisted because it would dilute our concentrated focus on South Africa, apartheid and the problems of the region. Also a tendency arose within the Movement to feel that black people should be leading it because it was a racial issue and blacks were the victims in South Africa and the moving force for change and that should be reflected in the way the Movement worked. The fact that we had people like Abdul Minty and Vella Pillay in the leadership of the Movement insulated us to some degree from those pressures. My own history

was helpful – I had been a political prisoner and couldn't be portrayed as having been aligned with white supremacy. But there was for a period a Black and Ethnic Minorities Committee, which in practice was rather weak because most of the activists involved were also active in other spheres, either in the trade union work of the Movement or in its local committee structures, and those because very time-consuming for activists. In London alone we had something between 20 and 30 local groups, and the London Committee. So black activists who were involved in that didn't have a lot of time to organise a black caucus within the Movement. But we had to respond occasionally to issues which cropped up in relation to anti-deportation campaigns and one of the difficulties was that there was no coherent anti-racist black organisation in the country to which we could relate in a consistent way. At the beginnings of the Movement there was a fairly influential body, the West Indian Standing Conference, but it grew weaker over the years and nothing quite like it emerged.

CG: The Anti-Apartheid Movement played an important international role – in relation to the Commonwealth and the UN especially, and towards the end of its period of existence, with the EEC. As well as its role within Britain, more than any other national movement, it had an international role. Were you involved in that?

AB: I wasn't much involved, but it featured a lot in our discussions, especially the Commonwealth because of its composition, with Britain wanting to maintain the institution but not to be influenced or pushed in any direction by it. We had many real allies within the Commonwealth governments, like India and many African governments and governments from the Caribbean. So we were in an unusual position. Officially we had no role in the Commonwealth, but we were always in there, usually with Abdul Minty, who was in close consultation, Archbishop Huddleston also, with Commonwealth leaders, lobbying and assisting the Commonwealth's internal processes to put pressure on successive British governments. From the point of view of exerting pressure on the British government, which was always our main target, strategically, the Commonwealth was hugely important, more important than the United Nations where we had less influence and where it was the ANC that had more of a role. In the machinery of the United Nations, through the Special Committee and the activism of Mr Reddy, the Movement had a reach greater than what you might have expected from its domestic relative weakness actually, in relation to the Tory Government, which was such a hard obstacle for us to move in the direction that we were trying to go.

CG: To sum up, can you say what you think the Movement's importance was? What were its real achievements?

AB: There are several issues to keep on the record here. First of all we struggled long and hard and with increasing success to give a voice in British public life to the liberation movements of Southern Africa. That was often uphill, but getting their speakers at key events, Labour Party conferences, the TUC, etc., not necessarily organised by the Movement, that was very important. It came to the point by the late '80s where the ANC could not cope with the demand for speakers. Many local or regional meetings expected to get an ANC speaker and were disappointed simply because the ANC didn't have enough people to go round. We helped to get the sanctions issue centrally onto the agenda, starting off with the consumer boycott which was a constant throughout the Movement's history, but raising that to the level of state policy through sanctions, and then the

direct pressure on corporate interests through disinvestment. These were three prongs of the same fork – the consumer boycott, state sanctions and disinvestment. There was a constant sustained assault on British interests and practices that helped to keep apartheid going for so long. We won some of those; in terms of the government we didn't move it hardly at all on sanctions, but possibly we prevented it from doing worse, the things it would like to have done to bail out the apartheid regime as its difficulties grew. That was hugely important. This succession of struggles over the years, local especially, and particularly the disinvestment campaign, educated several generations of politically interested people, which had long-term effects, because they may not have continued to be active, but when issues arose, they would be more likely to take up positions similar to the Movement's than to go against them. Time and again one saw people who had been attracted to the Movement, done something and then moved on, who you could probably count on if you needed to go back to them, as we did occasionally to get them to support something. If you think of someone like Gus Macdonald, who briefly edited *AA News* and then became a very powerful journalist and then a Labour Minister, or a guy I remember from UNSA and Cambridge University called Alan Hayling, who became a senior television producer, or Kim Howells – there are many people whose thinking about the issues was shaped in their youth by anti-apartheid activities and that helped to build a movement with deep roots in British public life.

ⁱ John Gaetsewe was then SACTU's Western Europe representative.