

**Interview with Gerard Omasta-Milsom for the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives
Committee project Forward to Freedom <http://www.aamarchives.org/>**

Jeff Howarth: My name is Jeff Howarth, it's the 17th of September 2013, and this interview is for the Forward to Freedom Anti-Apartheid Movement History Project. Can you please give me your full name?

Gerard Omasta-Milsom: I'm Gerard Omasta-Milsom.

JH: And can you tell me where you were born?

GO: I was born in Bushey in Hertfordshire on the 26th January 1962.

JH: And what do you do for a living?

GO: Currently?

JH: Yes.

GO: I am the manager, well in effect the Chief Executive, of Islington People's Rights which is an independent welfare, benefits and debt advice centre in the London Borough of Islington.

JH: And have you been involved in any political or campaigning activity, apart from the Anti-Apartheid Movement?

GO: Well, quite a breadth over the years, I'm just not sure how long an answer you want.

JH: I guess prior to the Anti-Apartheid...

GO: Oh prior, right. I was certainly interested in quite a number of issues. And in fact in the late '70s when I was still quite young, I got involved in the Ant-Nazi League and Rock Against Racism things, which were quite high profile and I think had quite a following amongst teenagers and young people, partly because of the link with music. So that was in London before I went to Bristol University. But I also had an interest in CND, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, and a number of environmental issues I suppose. And got involved in them even more at university.

JH: Great. Any political activity?

GO: Political, do you mean party political or general?

JH: Yes, or broader...

GO: Yes, well I mean I suppose I would say that CND and that involvement was political campaigning. I think I was involved in re-launching Harrow CND at the time, living in Hatch End, part of Harrow. I was I suppose on the fringes of the Labour Party and various other left organisations. But it all seems rather a long time ago now, I was 16–17. So it was only really

at Bristol University, which I went to aged 18, where I got involved in a whole host of things, including the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

JH: When and how did you first become aware of the situation in South Africa?

GO: I think I was broadly aware of the situation in South Africa from the news and a certain level of political interest in issues. But I must confess actually, prior to going to Bristol University, I didn't have a great knowledge. It may be worth mentioning that my father arrived in the UK as an Austrian Jewish refugee, so you could say the impact of enshrined racism and what it could mean for a particular race to be discriminated against was something I was all too aware of from my family background. My father ended up in effect having to leave as part of the Kinder transport, to link it with something else which has got some coverage certainly. I think it was his 11 year old sister, 8 year old brother and him aged 4 who basically came on their own to the UK minus their parents, although my grandparents did manage to get out subsequently. At Bristol University, I became quite friendly with somebody who'd had a year off and spent time in South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe. That was in '79-'80 when obviously there was lots of change in Zimbabwe. And he was quite interested in issues, and possibly rather embarrassingly for this interview, there was a meeting going on about Nelson Mandela and I said 'Who's Nelson Mandela?' and he just said 'Well come to this meeting'. He obviously knew quite a lot about Nelson Mandela because he'd spent time in Southern Africa and got to know quite a number of people. And then you could say it was a product of circumstances, because what turned out to be the situation was that there was in theory at Bristol University an anti-apartheid group but run by two students who were no longer actually students because they'd finished their courses, and one person who was just in the process of leaving or being thrown out of the university.

So at about the second meeting there was a discussion about whether the group should fold or whether it should continue and so basically three of us, one of whom knew quite a lot about it but actually probably wasn't a good person to be a campaigner, and two of us who possibly were good campaigners but knew virtually nothing about South Africa, found ourselves running the Bristol University Anti-Apartheid Society within about six weeks of arriving at Bristol University. And you could say things picked up from there because we thought, well we'd better give it a go and obviously became more knowledgeable and there was quite an active group in Bristol itself who gave us a lot of support, and were obviously older and knew people and because of that we could get good speakers and had a number of meetings and activities. I suppose that was the early '80s and there was an ability, if you put some effort into it, to get quite a lot of students to get involved in things. And there was a background anyway, the Student Union had a Mandela Bar, which obviously somebody had achieved many years before, giving it some historical connection.

JH: Fantastic, so that was a student group then.

GO: That was a student group. But it blended a bit, you could say, with the town group. Whilst I was saying there were quite a few people actually there weren't that many. So quite often there would be activities in Bristol that the students would support and quite often some of the non-students would come and support our events. I suppose in total there were only about ten people, but it included somebody called Ron Press, who was a South African ANC activist, and a chemistry lecturer at what was Bristol Polytechnic at the time, so you could always get him to speak, he was an ANC member and involved in a lot of things. The

Bristol group was quite an active group and actually remains to this day. There's even still quite an active group in Bristol now, some of whom are actually the same people who have been involved for rather a lot of years.

JH: So you said the motive for doing something about it was this meeting with a friend at university.

GO: You could say it was. I mean in a sense it was, and I suppose I was quite open to things. But I always find it interesting how things evolve, I don't know if it's fate or destiny. I mean I can't claim that I arrived at Bristol University thinking anti-apartheid is the thing I'm really going to get involved in. And actually I suspect, if one was looking at a sort of broader timescale of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, there was a bit of doldrums. I think in the early '80s, because Zimbabwe had become independent and so that had sort of gone off the agenda, and stuff to do with Mozambique and the other ex-Portuguese colonies had also slightly gone off the agenda, although there were civil wars. There had been the Soweto riots before, but actually the apartheid regime was quite strong at the time and actually the opposition movement wasn't that strong, or the international solidarity campaign. I think it was more by the mid-'80s that things had really developed a momentum. Actually the early '80s was a sort of, well I think, a period of development let's say. I suspect it wouldn't be observed as sort of the strongest period by any means because it was afterwards that the big concerts and the whole load of other things really took off.

JH: So were you active for the duration of your studies?

GO: Yes, certainly. I did a Geography degree as a bit of a part-time activity to the political activities at Bristol University, but did emerge with a degree, which most people I think were quite astonished about! Because in Bristol there had been quite an active town group and actually I'd got quite involved, I ended up as secretary of that when I finished as a student. I had been on the committee of the town group, initially as the student liaison person, and then I ended up – because nobody else wanted to do it – as Secretary, at a point where I'd finished my degree but wasn't doing that much. I got very involved in the Bristol town group, although still supporting the student group – it carried on and we still had contact. The Bristol group organised a whole load of protests and activities and campaigns throughout the '80s and I think was probably one of the most active groups. It had a membership of over 1,000, I know, at one point. It had an interesting spin off called the St Paul's Apartheid Free Zone, which was in the area in Bristol called St Paul's, that had become quite notorious in some ways because of inner city riots. It declared itself at a meeting of the community association an apartheid free zone, but then implemented it in terms of ensuring that all the shops in the locality stopped selling South African goods and got the Tesco's on the fringes to stop selling. Given the fact that – I don't know what percentage, but a large percentage of the population – were black British, it had quite an image for being a fiery area, it was often easy to sort of persuade people to do certain things, and so that was a good campaign. I suppose I became known because of my Bristol activities on what could be said to be the national scene. The structure of the Anti-Apartheid Movement at the time was that there was a national committee which, whilst it had individual members, also had a representative of each local group. So I quite often used to go to the – I think they were quarterly – national committee meetings as a Bristol representative. And so whilst I can't claim I got hugely involved at a national level, I did go to meetings and obviously also the annual general meeting. This is partly sort of moving on because in the mid ... well, obviously there were

loads of activities in the mid-'80s...by the late '80s, I think around '87, '88, there'd been quite a growth around the Anti-Apartheid Movement in terms of staff membership, and the decision was made to appoint a Field Officer who would be somebody employed by the Anti-Apartheid Movement but with a particular remit to work with the local groups and travel around the country and encourage their development and growth. So whilst I was actually quite happy in Bristol and had completed a teacher training course and quite a number of other things, in 1988 I think because about the fifth person had pointed out to me that there was this job working for the Anti-Apartheid Movement that seemed to be made for me, I applied for the job and got it. Which was actually slightly bizarre in the sense that I was living in Bristol at the time and suddenly got appointed to a London based job. I was also at the time organising ... I remember we'd set up a fortnight festival... we called it the Festival Against Apartheid, but anyway it was various concerts, exhibitions and other things. I sort of set the wheels in motion. So I remember literally I agreed to start on a Monday, I was organising this festival including the Sunday, but fortunately I had this slightly knackered Morris Minor van at the time. It had been a really busy time, I was living in rented accommodation and had this completely mad time of basically chucking all my belongings into the back of this Morris Minor van and moving to Stoke Newington to take on the job. Fortunately I'd got some old friends who lived in Stoke Newington who had a spare room to rent, so I managed to sort that out in the interim and started work on the Monday. I basically just moved on, I suppose, from voluntary activity for the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Bristol to be working for the Anti-Apartheid Movement nationally with this role of field officer. But actually in Bristol, we'd been involved in setting up – what was it called? – it was the Anti-Apartheid Movement South West Regional Committee, which was an attempt to ensure that there were groups in the various other places. Certainly at one time there were groups in Bath, Cheltenham, Gloucester, Stroud, Bridgewater, Taunton, Exeter, Newton Abbott, Plymouth, and another one called something or other ... in Dorset, another couple ... and there was something in Cornwall around St Austell. So already I'd been playing some sort of role in the regional sense, then moved on to this, I suppose, with a national remit. Actually that was an interesting job because obviously at the time there were around 200 local groups, I think, and at least two independent structures, the Welsh Anti-Apartheid Movement and a Scottish Committee. And the Welsh operated virtually autonomously, but the Scots were a bit more linked in, and so it was 200 groups which I was meant to keep in touch with quite regularly. But the level at which they needed support varied. So I mean some of them you did spend quite a lot of time with and others, to be honest, much as I liked going back to the Bristol group just for old time's sake, didn't really need any support as such. But there were plenty of others around that did. So that was in some ways moving you on thorough a sort of decade!

JH: That's great. The next question ... can you tell me more about what was involved then? How to maintain the support for 200 groups?

GO: Well, I mean obviously the other role was working very closely with the AAM Staff. I was based at the Anti-Apartheid Movement office, I can't quite remember, but I probably spend about half my time not at the office, I'd be going around talking to groups. But it was also meant to be playing a role in making sure that campaigns that the Anti-Apartheid Movement was doing at the time had dimensions that could involve local groups. Now I must say the boycott campaign, which had been going for a long time, was actually always a very good one, but at one point there was a particular focus on Tesco, lots of groups obviously did all sorts of shops trying to persuade them to stop selling South Africa goods, but you know

there were Tescos all over the country and we had, I remember, at least two national days of action in the late 80s— because I started working in 1988 – certainly in the next year or two, we had two particular days of action. And maybe I shouldn't be saying this, but it always slightly amused me, basically we worked out that we could virtually cover every store with local groups. But there were a few odd areas, I remember it was actually in Kent, and some similar directions? Anyway we got two cars from HQ that you know, basically, were slightly sort of rent-a-mob with a few placards in the back, so we literally drove round and kept turning at stores, waving the placards long enough to annoy the manager, and actually have quite an aggressive interaction with customers, so almost knowing we would get told that they'd call the police. Because in a sense I think we wanted to move on to the next one swiftly, because I think we were trying to do something like 12 of Tesco's stores in a day! I remember we were ending up in Margate, Broadstairs, Ramsgate ... I think it was Broadstairs, it was very narrow pavements and everybody seemed to get very upset. But it did mean we made our mark and there were no local groups there, so in a sense that was the only way we were going to do something of that nature. There was also the Shell campaign, I'm sure you know, in terms of the oil embargo. There was always quite an emphasis on trying to ensure that this was implemented. The Shell campaign was another one that was good to involve groups, because actually I'm not sure we ever got a list of all the Shell petrol stations, but I mean there were Shell petrol stations virtually everywhere, and so there was an ability to have an active campaign in Macclesfield or Wirksworth, I only mention Wirksworth because ... I had quite a good knowledge of Britain ... Wirksworth Anti-Apartheid was actually the only place that sent me going to a map! It's in Derbyshire, not far from Matlock, but that was I think the only local group that I had to find out where it was, because all the others I could actually know where they were without having to do any additional research. So there was a lot of effort trying to ensure that one had campaigns that could engage activists, you know, not just in London and have a big national campaign. But on the other hand, which had certainly been one of the things in Bristol, you know at times you'd have a big national demo, obviously you could send ten coaches to the national demo and people would enjoy their day out – apart from when it broke down which was certainly the case with one of ours – but actually if you want to engage people at a local level, it would be good to have a sort of local target. You know, there were lobbies of parliament, that was also fine – you could send people to go and lobby their MPs or do stuff in London, but there were dimensions that you could get the local groups to be involved in, and I think that did work well. It was interesting because I worked for the Anti-Apartheid Movement first as field officer, but then, I suppose as things changed for the good, the membership and subscriptions and affiliations and money that the Anti-Apartheid Movement had went down. So actually a number of staff left and there were various issues, I think, I can't remember how many job titles I had because I worked there from 1988 to 1994.

[Recording 2]

GO: I started work at the Anti-Apartheid Movement national office as field officer in 1988, but in fact because of staff changes, the local groups secretary left, who was the person who dealt with relations from the office base, so I think actually I became the local groups secretary, but retaining the responsibility for going out and then possibly managed less of the going out and about in the country. I think various other people left, so I ended up in effect as the Campaigns Officer, because I know I took on the responsibility for working with trade unions, local authorities, and did I deal with faith groups? In essence I think I ended up with most campaign groups. And certainly by 1993, after a number of changes, and the

organisation being much smaller – I think we were down to three of us in effect, because yes there was Mike Terry as Executive Secretary and Mamta Singh as membership secretary, and myself as Campaigns Officer. But four or five years prior to that there had been something like 24 members of staff for the organisation. Interestingly, you could say in an organisational sense the organisation was a victim of its own success, because actually all the changes meant that it was regarded as a campaign that had largely achieved its aims, and so went into a very different level of work and were looking to the future. And it transformed itself into ACTSA- Action for Southern Africa.

JH: You said that when you started there were 24 members of staff and then it sort of shrank. My question is about the dynamic of the organisation, obviously there was a significant change ... could you describe the dynamic when you first started, then possibly how it changed?

GO: I think when I joined, in the late 1980s, it was still in a period of growth. I remember they appointed a press officer, which was another new post, a bit after that. Then there were changes in Namibia and then I suppose it was the release of Nelson Mandela in 1990 and a number of other political prisoners. But it did mean that in a campaigning sense actually some of the issues became more complex, like the boycott campaign was still actually being pushed in the early '90s after the release of Nelson Mandela. But it was clear that there were changes going on, so in some ways getting people on the streets was getting more difficult because it was seen that things were changing – which was a good thing – but actually it meant people didn't necessarily feel it was sort of, you know, quite as terrible as it had been. I mean it's worth citing when I first got there, because actually, I was just recollecting, the Anti-Apartheid Movement bought a double decker bus in 1988. I was involved in that, although actually the decision had been taken to do it before I joined. I think it spent its first year as the 'Boycott Bus', very decorated, part of the boycott campaign. Then the second year it was the 'Freedom Bus', but very much the message was freedom and the previous year it had been boycott. And that, incidentally, was a very good sort of support mechanism because obviously it did tour round the country and it was a very visible Leyland Olympian bus with a top speed of about 50 miles an hour, which would mean if you were trying to go anywhere of any distance it was a rather frustrating experience for the drivers. But it did get places. But actually it was always a bit of an issue, the overnight parking, the security of the vehicle. Actually it is worth mentioning that there clearly were some people that didn't like the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and the fate of that bus was that it ended up mysteriously burning in a depot about a mile down the road actually, not far from Highbury and Islington. And I think possibly the issue was that the place we had parked wasn't quite as secure as we thought it was.

JH: Was there a suggestion that it was possibly National Front?

GO: Well, there certainly was a suggestion. I must say we never really got to the bottom of it, as well as possibly thinking we should have found somewhere more secure to park a large double decker bus with 'Freedom for South Africa' painted on it. But there always have been people who were against the Movement, linked with the far right. I know that somebody called Sean O'Donovan, actually, who I don't know if you've had contact with, but he was involved in Haringey. He was an individual on the National Committee, and at the time, national committee members were allocated a region of the country to liaise with. It was sort of linked to the field officer work and having national committee members linked in, not just

one member of staff, and for some reason Sean ended up with the north-west of England. I really can't remember why, but I have a feeling that a few parts of the country people just slightly randomly ended up with, because somebody needed to be. I think I was originally going to go to the meeting, but in the end I didn't and he went to a meeting in Blackburn which ended up basically getting attacked by the NF and other types, and was thoroughly unpleasant. I think he thought I'd backed out of it because I'd got wind that it might be a rather heavy meeting, but actually I'd been to a couple of meetings in Blackburn and they'd been fine. Jack Straw was the local MP and had been known to turn out to meetings. There were some of those Lancashire towns that, actually it's well documented these days, that have got BNP sort of elements. And there were certainly times that the Anti-Apartheid Movement did have quite a torrid time. And on some of the campaigns you would get faced by people who would...well actually they were sort of apathetic. I mean some people were sort of like 'Oh, why do you bother, it's a long way away' and then there's obviously other people who had a view that South Africa was doing alright and wasn't that a rather good model for the rest of the world, although you couldn't figure out sometimes if people were just trying to just wind you up. But it was certainly interesting. One event I remember that used to happen every year actually, was in Stratford upon Avon. There was a Shakespeare Day, and they always used to invite the South African ambassador to be there, so there'd always be a contingent, and you'd end up with a sort of protest. Stratford upon Avon is quite genteel in some ways as well, and I think the Shakespeare event would then attract quite a lot of genteel people, so you'd always turn up and I remember going on one of those demonstrations – and it may have been because we had a huge banner – but trying to go for a drink afterwards and in effect not getting let in to any of the pubs in Stratford. I think by the end they stopped inviting the South Africans, maybe in '88 or '89. I think they finally stopped, because obviously it was a bit of a distraction. And the issue was why were they inviting the South African ambassador to this event anyhow? Because it wasn't immediately evident, but I think they just had a habit of inviting loads of dignitaries. And certainly there were lots of interesting events and conferences where there was a South African presence. And I'm sure the sports boycott has featured in some other interviews and dimensions, but certainly there was a whole history of different events being targeted and activists being involved with it, well particularly around rugby demonstrations, in Cardiff and Twickenham and other things.

JH: Can you tell me a bit more about the bus? Because we've got a very striking image of the bus, I'm not sure if it's the Boycott Bus or if it's the Freedom Bus...

GO: Which was the same bus, just re-painted in late '89.

JH: Did you drive it to places? With a team of outreach workers? Or...

GO: Yes, I mean basically there was a driver and I remember at the time it was quite interesting because technically anybody could drive a double decker bus because it was neither an HGV vehicle (because it wasn't carrying goods) nor a PSV vehicle or whatever it's called [a public service vehicle], because it wasn't carrying passengers. However, no insurance company would ever give you insurance for a bus (possibly also because it was owned by the Anti-Apartheid Movement!) if you weren't guaranteeing that the person who was driving it had some experience of driving a large vehicle. In theory there was just the one bus driver but we would take it to places where there was an anti-apartheid group. The idea was that the bus would go there, but obviously you'd liaise and the local group would

use it as a focus for a day of activities. And because it was a large double decker bus it would intrinsically quite often get publicity in places like Chesterfield, you know, some of the smaller places. The fact that you had a large double decker bus very clearly with a campaigning message would be a story in itself, whereas I suspect in Birmingham or Glasgow it wasn't quite such a big story as such. It was purchased, I know, in either late '88 or early '89, but as part of the Boycott 89 campaign. To ensure the particular focus, it was Mick Flynn, the local group secretary and myself as field officer who basically coordinated it and I'm sure it must have visited around 100 locations. We did it from something like May to September, or maybe it was into October, but it didn't include the height of winter on the grounds that parking in the pouring rain in a slightly desolate town centre, you might not do too well. But it must have been out on the road five or six months. Then it had a break and because, I'm trying to remember, the 1990 campaign, but anyway it was redecorated as the Freedom Bus – I'm pretty sure it was that way round – to do a similar exercise the following year and was very well received. I think the only thing which one learnt, although it seemed like an obscure detail, local activists had to ensure that people realise where there are low bridges and low trees! It got a few odd bashes even when people were obviously saying, 'Can you make sure, can you get it there?' but would forget that actually. I know one of the drivers got immensely fed up after finding himself being sent up some lane and finding a low bridge and in effect having to do a 20 point turn on a narrow lane with the double decker bus! Certainly we lost a window on the bough of a tree or something similar. There had been a specially commissioned film, certainly in 1989, about the boycott campaign. It was about 15 minutes long, quite short, and it was the sort of film you could get people to pop on and watch; it wasn't really long. I was quite astonished, we shoved an ordinary domestic TV and video player on it. It was called 'Fruits of Freedom', I think, and was commissioned especially for that. And yes, I was very impressed with the telly and video that bumped around the country for six months and were still fine when they came back. There was an exhibition downstairs, and that upstairs. We'd in fact left quite a lot of the seating from the original bus. In a sense it cost quite a lot to convert it, but it wasn't too bad upstairs as we left about two-thirds of seating in and had the screen at the front. And downstairs we had taken out most of the seating so that you had more space for exhibitions and leaflets and things.

JH: It wasn't an open topped bus was it?

GO: No, it wasn't open topped. It was an ex-Southampton Bus Company bus, because apparently Southampton Bus Company was one of the few that specialised in converting their buses, if you wanted them, into something else. Obviously we paid, and I'm sure the Anti-Apartheid Movement paid a reasonable amount of money, but they did actually do a good job.

JH: You got two years out of it before it was burnt?

GO: Well yes, although we could have got quite a lot more. The Leyland Olympians were, I think, the generation after Routemasters, and they were quite solid old beasts with, I think, Perkins diesel engines which would have kept going forever really. But it had no power assisted steering and I do remember the guy who did it the first year, called Mark Eastgate, who now lives in Spain, but I'm tenuously in touch with him, nice guy. He was quite a wiry fellow and in the summer he'd wear a T-shirt, but you could literally see his muscles because he was having to wrestle the bus to actually get it to do any tight manoeuvres. I do think that it was a useful tool and got the message out in some of the more out of the way places, and

it also went to a few festivals in the summer. I'm trying to remember exactly where it went, I think it went to Glastonbury festival, and I think also to WOMAD?

JH: Of '89?

GO: Yes, I'm pretty sure it went to festivals. I'm desperately trying to remember if I've got it right. I'm sure at least one, but I'm now trying to recollect exactly. We also at the time used to organise a fun run in Brockwell Park, as a fundraiser as well as an event with music and other things. So it went there as well, to provide a sort of additional dimension.

JH: Were there any campaigns that you were involved in? I mean obviously lots of campaigns. Any that you ...

GO: Those were the two biggest ones. By the early '90s there were very specific responses to things like the Boipatong massacre and other events. And then there was a visit from South African politicians which generated things, which maybe was more your earlier question, but I think you could say in the late '80s – part of which I was in Bristol but part working – it was almost quite straightforward in that there was the evil apartheid regime and there was a clear position of sanctions, the boycott campaign, things like Shell, 'Free all political prisoners'. Obviously, it was great news, the release of Nelson Mandela and the changes, but actually in a campaigning sense the issues then became more complex. And street activities became more complicated, there were a lot of postcard campaigns to persuade the British government to take on certain issues, but as I say I think the campaigning angles became more difficult by the early '90s.

JH: Because of the dying down of enthusiasm?

GO: Yes, in the sort of mass campaigning sense and in a sense you had to reiterate the message that actually things hadn't totally changed. There was the cultural boycott issue, which I didn't mention earlier, but that was well publicised, a lot of demonstrations and events to do with musicians who'd clearly broken the cultural boycott. Although I think that by 1990 and the early '90s that also became more complicated, with people quite unsure whether it should be operated in exactly the same way because clearly there was a momentum for change. And there were issues like the Bantustans which still existed in fact until, I was going to say the end of apartheid, until '94. So there was work done on campaigning against Bophutatswana and Ciskei. The odd thing was that Transkei operated as almost a liberated zone before the rest of South Africa, it ended up with quite a progressive government despite the fact it was originally set up as a sort of puppet state by the South African regime. So some of the issues certainly became rather more complex during that period. And a lot of it was about putting pressure on the British government to maintain pressure on South Africa and ensure that things did develop, because with certain massacres and incidents in '92 and '93 there was a concern that the whole process of change was going to get derailed and possibly things not happen. I think actually also amongst people who'd been involved in the campaign for years there was almost a sort of disbelief that actually things were moving on and not as a blood bath. I'm not sure in the mid-'80s what people quite thought would happen, but I think people thought probably there would be change, but actually there was quite a scepticism that it would happen because the white apartheid regime would be willing for it to change. Now whether it really was willing to change I'm not sure. I'm sure it was the economic sanctions, it was the pressure, it was

everything else that drove it to change. But I think most people who were involved were actually probably pleasantly surprised that actually from '89-'94 there was a sort of transition. Things went in a way that, if one thinks back to the earlier '80s I think nobody thought it would change in that way.

JH: When you look back, what particular incidents stand out?

GO: In South Africa or in Britain?

JH: In your experiences really.

GO: One thing that I didn't mention is that there was a big campaign in 1988, actually it was just before I started working with the Anti-Apartheid Movement, which was the Nelson Mandela Freedom at 70 campaign, best known for the Mandela concert. There was also a march from Glasgow to London as part of that. I was still in Bristol so we in the south-west felt a bit left out because there was this march going from Glasgow to Manchester to Birmingham to London. Actually three of us in particular were quite keen cyclists and so we ended up organising a Land's End to London Mandela cycle ride, which I suppose you could say was a south-west initiative, which was as I say possibly as a result of feeling left out of this national initiative because we were out in the south-west. Certainly that was an interesting week, it was Steve Reicher from Exeter, Idris Roker from Bath and myself still based in Bristol at the time, and about another ten cyclists, although some didn't actually do all of it, cycling from Land's End to London. Trying to remember actually, yes, the groups I remember we visited on the way were people in Cornwall, then Plymouth, Newton Abbot, Exeter, Taunton, Bridgwater, Bristol, Bath, Swindon, Reading, then London basically.

JH: Ending in Hyde Park?

GO: Yes, we ended in Hyde Park. We joined the marchers somewhere in Haringey actually. It was Sean O'Donovan and Nad Pillay and people, because I think the marchers had their first London night somewhere near Alexandra Palace, Haringey/Tottenham way. So we joined them and went with them on the last bit to join the national demonstration in Hyde Park.

JH: I've got video footage, I'd be curious to see you there. Did you get much press coverage?

GO: We did, although you could say the local press, but yes, because actually, sometimes you'd get press interest. I can remember on the spur of the moment we cycled through Newbury and we went past the local newspaper office and we just sort of stuck our heads in there. We got ourselves a spontaneous photo call because obviously they thought it was quite interesting local news, us cycling from Land's End. And because of the Mandela concert, I think it was actually all quite high profile at the time. And most of the places where we had organised events we'd have a small rally or public meeting. For instance, I remember the one in Bath, we had Tony Robinson address, although he was actually less well known at the time but lived in Bristol and was supportive.

JH: He would have been Baldrick then.

GO: Yes, so I suppose he was reasonably high profile. And we had a number of Labour and Lib Dem MPs give their support along the way. I don't think we had Conservatives and certainly at that time that wasn't the way it would go. That was still the time I think Margaret Thatcher regarded Nelson Mandela as a terrorist, and quite a lot of the Conservative Party still paid lip service at least to that. So that was an interesting week and also it certainly kept me fit because actually I'd had a period of being a keen cyclist, but actually I hadn't been doing that much cycling. I ended up basically saying I would do the Land's End to London cycle ride, but certainly wasn't really fit at the time but managed it and that was an interesting week.

JH: Can you describe the high points and low points?

GO: I think the high points more generally were around, the big concert and the big events and suddenly realising that actually you'd got through to a mass audience. Mike Terry obviously can't be involved in this archive, but was a key player. Anyway, I remember, I think it was shortly after I joined in October 1988 that he recounted a story. In 1988 he went on holiday to Greece. As part of the Nelson Mandela (Freedom at 70) campaign there were some little badges that had become very popular. Mike and many other campaigners got used to having badges and things and you'd got used to seeing them on demonstrations and other events. However he was very pleased to find himself with a planeload of British holiday makers going to Greece, most of them wearing the badge. Well he was going to Greece for some reason; I don't know if it was a holiday – Mike very rarely had holidays – but you know finding quite a lot of people on this plane wearing the Nelson Mandela Freedom 70 badges was impressive. I think he suddenly realised that the Anti-Apartheid Movement had moved on from being a smaller political organisation to being a mass campaign. If a load of people just going on holiday to Greece would be wearing their badges proudly. And I think it's also the number of campaigns that had a mass involvement. I'm not sure how easy it is to quantify, but I think it would be interesting to try and work out, as people talk about things like consumer power and other issues in the present time, how many people, for instance, got involved in campaigning against South African goods and did things? I know a few of us for instance went on a short break to West Wales once. It was the small town of Haverfordwest and we just playfully did a sort of boycott protest in some shop, including the thing which used to wind up shopkeepers, which is basically to fill up your shopping trolley full of South African goods, then get to the check-out and suddenly seem to realise that they were all South African goods and so abandon them whilst making a big furore and fuss about it and walk out of the shop, which you know used to upset the shopkeeper greatly and either involve, annoy or perplex other shoppers. But you knew invariably that you'd made some sort of mark, even if the shopkeeper may not have emerged any happier about the campaign. But I think it is some of those smaller things that possibly don't always get recorded, but that actually I think had a very major impact in terms of the campaign, and getting things to move in South Africa.

JH: And low points?

GO: A low point. Well, certainly having talked about you know my first involvement, you know in the early '80s, there was a point it was actually quite difficult to get people particularly interested and active whilst you thought that actually it was a terrible thing and everybody should be interested. There was ... you could get very apathetic 'Oh, it's a long way away' type thing. As in 'What difference would it make?', you know. So I think that was

one. I think the other thing, and I'm not trying to remember all the sort of historical details, I mean there were various points in the early '90s where optimism would sort of become more of a realism or pessimism? Because of certain developments in South Africa and having thought things were moving forward you'd suddenly think they were going one step back, and there were various massacres and incidents and things which you thought, 'Oh, are things really changing?' And I think the particularly worrying thing there was that you'd lost your ability probably to have huge demonstrations and the organisation had lost dynamism, well it was the opposite of having a momentum of its own. The perception was, I think, that South Africa had a momentum of change and yet it wasn't totally clear cut yet, and your ability to feel you could then totally influence things or get thousands of people back on the street was largely lost.

JH: You felt more of a witness to events, less involved in them?

GO: Yes. But I mean fortunately things did develop. In 1994 South Africa had its first free and fair elections and you know there was a tremendous change.

JH: You talked about sometimes hostile reactions. Were there any specific events that you can recall where meetings were ... you felt threatened or threatened by the apathy?

GO: Certainly, at some sports events you could end up with quite a hostile reception. Some of it was clearly you now ... let's cite rugby, I mean there were rugby fans who objected to this idea of intervention because they regarded rugby as sacred and so it was about people potentially disrupting their sport. Then there may also have been some element of people who were hostile to the Anti-Apartheid Movement, but I have a feeling you probably got more of the people who were just fed up that people were making a fuss and didn't really understand the issues because sometimes they would be OK. I must say, the other issue that you sometimes would have, would be – and this is possibly a comment I didn't make earlier – the Anti-Apartheid Movement was a great organisation, it became quite a sort of broad church of activists. I suppose literally because you would get people who'd come from local churches and were happy to be seen on a demonstration, but obviously were quite, you know, mellow. But you would end up with potentially everything from them to revolutionary socialists, like the Socialist Workers Party and others who had a sort of 'One solution – revolution' approach to the world, who actually would be potentially quite up for a punch up. So I can certainly ... and then you'd get other people who just were on a short fuse, I'm just remembering one. So you would end up at times, if you were an organiser on a demonstration, with an interesting dynamic, trying to ensure the whole thing was peaceful, which at times was actually, keeping all the people in order. And I remember one person who much of the time was fine, but the trouble was if he got riled his language would just end up full of expletives and so it would be a bit back to front because you'd get somebody trying to have a rational argument with him and actually in a sense it went completely the other way because it wasn't going right! This person espousing things on your behalf has degenerated to sort of bleep bleep bleep bleep bleep! And everybody was a sort of 'racist' after two minutes of any argument. So you would end up with an interesting dynamic at times, of how would you be conveying your argument in a rational, coherent and cogent way, not ending up with people who undermined it. Certainly in Bristol we had a few sort of anarchists and class war people and some of them were actually quite sensible and fine, but others were up for things and if the police came, became confrontational

JH: Were these at public meetings?

GO: No, these were at demonstrations. And then at one point we had a sort of hippy bunch, perfectly supportive, but quite often I'm not sure what they'd been up to. I'd always end up shoving them at the back because they'd either been down the pub or had some other intoxicants or other things, and just spent their time giggling uncontrollably. I'd end up shoving them at the back, just to make up the numbers, but tried to make sure they didn't engage anybody in dialogue because they'd be unable to do so and would almost be a caricature of the sort of stoned hippie you'd expect on a demonstration! So those were interesting times. And now I've forgotten what the original question was ...

JH: In terms of being at an event where there was a negative reaction against you.

GO: Yep, and actually I probably deviated into how at times you were almost having to deal with your own supporters. But certainly I mean there were events where you got far right elements turning around, although having cited earlier something that happened to Sean O'Donovan and not me, I mean I think I personally was quite fortunate in not being involved in that. Obviously I can remember some incidents, but actually that's to do with other campaigning I've been involved in and ending up in rather sort of heavy situations, but I think the nice thing about the Anti-Apartheid Movement by the late '80s was you were quite often amongst quite a big group, so there was a strength in numbers. And quite often we were joined by people like local MPs and other dignitaries were also there, which would mean that you had a sort of credibility as well, and that added to it. I'm trying to remember if there's any particular instances. I remember once which was just surreal, actually, rather than anything else, doing some flyposting for a public meeting in Bristol, I think that was the early '80s, and we got accosted by the police. But somehow we managed to persuade them that actually flyposting was legal so they went away. But I can remember thinking, 'How did we manage to get away with that one?'

JH: I have to wind this up shortly. Looking back, what are your feelings about your involvement?

GO: Certainly, from a personal point of view it was very interesting and I suppose a clear feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment. There are not that many campaigns in Britain that can be felt to have achieved their aims. That's obviously a very specific thing to the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Personally, I suppose, I also found it very interesting because I got involved at quite a young age and found myself then working for the Anti-Apartheid Movement as field officer aged 26 and then worked to age 32 and at the end was, in effect, in the office sense, was sort of the deputy. And one thing I suppose I didn't highlight was, I met Nelson Mandela at the freedom of the city event and a number of other things, and met leading ANC people. So whilst I've had other jobs and roles and been involved in other things since. I suppose I was almost spoilt in my late 20s and early 30s by the fact that I was involved in a very big campaign and whilst at the remuneration level working for the Anti-Apartheid Movement wasn't that great, I think the kudos and other satisfaction it provided more than compensated for it. I think any other jobs and campaigns I've been involved in since seem to pale a bit into insignificance. Maybe that's a personal comment, but occasionally I think I should get involved in some things and then I think I'm not sure it's that important or that significant, but in some ways that feels slightly odd if you feel you've sort of peaked at 32, because actually there's rather a lot of things to do in life afterwards. Mind you

having had three children and got involved in a whole host of other things, that certainly keeps me busy. But I know it's quite funny because I think quite often people assume I'm far older than I am only because I was doing quite a lot when I was quite young. I also had quite a big beard, so I think I looked older than I was. And now I've shaved off the beard it's possibly the reverse, but maybe that's no bad thing. But certainly it was a great campaign to be involved in and I've certainly also made a lot of contacts and friends, some of whom are now back in South Africa, various people who got involved in other things. Obviously there's a lot of friends and others that I've remained in touch with, because actually there was quite a remarkable collection of people who worked for the Anti-Apartheid Movement, or were active as volunteers or others, in or around London and around the country.

JH: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

GO: No. I think one thing I hadn't highlighted was I realised was that this was obviously about London. There was a London Committee and a whole number of activities that went on to do with London local groups and the regional committee of the London region, and there was a whole host of activities. And also a number of sub-committees of the Anti-Apartheid Movement like the BME [Black & Ethnic Minorities] sub-committee and then there was a 'Lawyers Against Apartheid', and loads of other groups. There was a medical one, and I'm trying to remember all the others, you know campaigns that there were sort of sectoral or however you'd describe them.

JH: [Unicef] Against Apartheid.

GO: Yes, yes. Which obviously all made contributions – actually were able to target very specific areas and groups in an effective way.

JH: Thank you very much for your time.