

Interview with Glenys Kinock for the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee project Forward to Freedom <http://www.aamarchives.org/>

JH: This is Jeff Howarth for the Forward to Freedom project. It is Wednesday 20th November 2013. Could you please say who you are and when and where you were born.

GK: My name is Glenys Kinock, I'm a member of the House of Lords now, and I was born in 1944 in a small village called Roade in Northamptonshire, which is where my father was working on the railway during the war.

JH: Thank you. Tell me what you do or did for a living – professionally, I guess.

GK: I was a teacher for 30 years in both primary and secondary schools, starting in a grammar school in South Wales. Then when I moved to London I became a primary school teacher and I focused mainly on children's literacy. At 50 I became an MEP and spent 15 years representing Wales. I worked mainly on Europe's international development policies, including trade, and I travelled a lot, mainly in Africa. After some thought, and after 15 years, I decided to retire. Then after just two weeks I had a call from Gordon Brown asking me to become Minister of State for Europe I agreed and became member of the House of Lords. Then later I was very happy to be asked to become Minister for Africa – a role I had until Labour lost the election. I continue to work on international issues related to tackling global poverty, human rights, peace and security.

JH: Could you tell me a bit about the origins of your political awareness?

GK: My family were active Labour Party members – my father was a very strong trade unionist who had left school at 13 and joined the Merchant Navy. He came from a poor family and had a strong sense of the need to always struggle for justice for all people. He had a tough time but told me how affected he was by misery and suffering he saw when his ships were docked. My dad was radical and progressive and always stood up for those who needed support. I grew up in Holyhead in Anglesey in North Wales, where you certainly have wide and broad horizons and where the sea dominates everything. But my father brought my brother and I up to believe that we had to tackle inequality, we had to be aware that not everybody had the same opportunities as we had. Mine was a working-class background – none of my family had been educated beyond the age of 13, had never been to university, but both my brother and I did because my parents wanted my brother and I to have the chances they never had. My father used to talk to me about when he was at sea – he had been to Africa many times, and he had seen the conditions that people were enduring. He talked to me about, for instance, about South Africa, where he saw men working in chains on the dock. And he had a great sense of the need for justice – I was very lucky to have grown up with that. I was involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement, CND and the Labour Party from an early age. I was, and still am, more of a campaigner than a politician – it's about people being excluded and marginalised and denied respect and proper status. There are still major concerns about poverty and high levels of inequality, and denials of fundamental freedoms and human rights.

JH: Thank you. Have you been involved in any – when you were a student – is that when you became aware of the Anti-Apartheid ...?

GK: Yes, I was very active as a student in the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and was a supporter of the South African Black Sash movement and for instance at the annual South Wales Miners Gala we would join the procession. This was a huge event with busloads of people coming down from the South Wales valleys to march, and women students organised the Black Sash part of the march. We wore black sashes and we would carry our anti-apartheid banner.

I had hardly ever seen a black person, growing up in a small North Wales town, but in university there were students from all over the world, particularly undergraduate mining engineers from Africa. I learned a lot from them, from talking to them – about how they saw things and what battles needed to be fought. And I've never believed that we battle on behalf of anybody – it's about being alongside, and with people. I think we were very well aware of that in the Anti-Apartheid Movement, when it was formed and worked in Britain – we were very well aware of the need to understand that we had no real grasp of what their suffering involved. And the first time I saw for myself was when years later I observed the registration of voters and the election. We went up to the north of Namibia and saw heartbreaking levels of poverty and need. And I saw white Namibians dining in Kaiserstrasse! It remains my view that Namibia had, in many ways Namibians suffered, a worse form of apartheid than South Africa. I wrote a book about my experience at that election.

JH: I wanted to talk about your experience in Namibia, so I guess we could talk about that now. Could you tell me more about that, and the people you met, the case study ...

GK: Well, when we were in the north – and these pictures in the book tell the full story – they are of very malnourished children ... The people were strong, but they had been beaten down, literally in some cases, by the regime. The way that they were treated on the farms was terrible. I heard their stories and heard of their suffering. Nothing can actually replace meeting people and hearing their stories. And then subsequently, on the way back through South Africa, I heard about the lack of opportunities for education, there was no healthcare, and we went to a township and saw the isolation of people. In a short car journey, to see that, everybody was walking and you had a sense of a really terrible enforced division of people, and saw that a white minority was able to dominate and could only do this through the most brutal tactics. So all of those things came together and the only thing you can do is – certainly when I was in Cardiff and then subsequently in London when we had the Anti-Apartheid Movement – is for like-minded people to plan and have a strategy. And I think that everybody who was involved had a very strong sense of the need to live in a better world and the need to embrace people wherever they are, whatever situation they're living in. The situation wasn't of their making, it was made by the people who were employing various forms of tyranny to oppress them. So it's a whole collection of feelings that you have, but then you translate them into action – I don't know if you want to go on to talk about the Anti-Apartheid Movement?

JH: Yes, we could go back to your first awareness of South Africa.

GK: It was when my dad spoke about it. He was very good at painting a picture in words, and he was just so angry that this was happening. When he was a very young boy from Wales he travelled around the world – he'd been everywhere, all over Latin America and Africa, the Pacific and the Caribbean ...

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When I saw that Bertrand Russell and many other greater thinkers that I admired had backed the call that was being made for an end to apartheid, it was just a natural thing to do. Bertrand Russell's book, 'Has Man a Future?' is about the dangers of nuclear arms. It made a big impression on me and I joined CND. Again, that was a book my dad gave me to read, because it was his view as well.

JH: So did you join the Anti-Apartheid Movement?

GK: I did of course join AAM as soon as I could. I already knew key activists like Ethel de Keyser, and I made my very first public speech for Ethel on the subject of the South African women's protest march on International Women's Day. Every year Ethel used to have an event where lots of women would come. Ethel said, 'Come on Glenys, you're busy in the Movement, you've just got to come and now say what you stand for – and that was the first platform speech I ever made. There was the big Trafalgar Square rally in 1985, a big one where Jesse Jackson, Trevor [Huddleston] and Oliver Tambo spoke. I remember reading pieces in the papers that the Secret Service were engaged in following what we were doing in the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and I think it was Geoffrey Howe who said he wanted to have a cordon around that whole area so that you couldn't have any anti-apartheid activity at the time. Geoffrey Howe was Foreign Office Minister. And then Douglas Hurd was the Home Office Minister at the time and he stopped Geoffrey Howe doing that. I can't tell you how many hours I spent on the pavement outside South Africa House, in the pouring rain generally. Those vigils, we learned, meant a lot in South Africa. I still pinch myself when I walk through the front door of South Africa House and am reminded of the times on the pavement outside. Mike Terry would rally us and make us get out there and do it, and Chris Child – have you talked to Chris Child at all?

JH: He's definitely been interviewed.

GK: Chris subsequently worked for Neil and, if I can jump around different things, the moment that I most value, looking back, was when we had our big meeting in Harare on children. Trevor [Huddleston] and I worked on it together and I think it was a real turning point in the history of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. We knew that by proving what they [the South African police] had been doing to children, that would turn things around, and I think that actually was the case. I remember there was a little girl called Nthabiseng, whose name meant 'Make me happy', who had been shot in the back and in the stomach. She was in a wheelchair, and I remember listening to her and we were all crying because it was just so terrible to hear this child, who'd been through so much. But then what it did for us was make us angry, because it was just such a terrible story. And there was a 17-year old boy, who had been strapped to a post and had bright lights shining in his face and he had been beaten, whipped with sticks. It's a terrible thing to say, but it was an event that did draw very serious attention across the world to the crimes that were being committed, and I got a real sense that they could no longer claim that none of these things happened, because we had provided the proof. It was an amazing event, in Harare, and we managed to get doctors and teachers and lots of people out of South Africa, this was absolutely unprecedented, to this conference. Victoria Brittain was very involved – you've probably spoken to her or somebody will have

JH: She's been interviewed, yes.

GK: If you can't defend the rights of children to life, and that was often the case, they were denied even their lives, then you have really no platform that anybody should tolerate having to listen to. So that, in 1987, was for me the most important moment. And we raised funds to do all of that, the Bishop Ambrose Reeves Trust was set up by Mike and Bob [Hughes]. We raised funds so that we could hold the conference and do other things as well. I got a real sense that the Anti-Apartheid Movement was international. We weren't there as Anti-Apartheid UK, we were there as part of an international movement, fighting for peace and justice for the people of South Africa. That was for me very much a defining moment. We were always very conscious that we didn't do that. Mike Terry was a wonderful man – what was great about Mike was that when it all finished, he trained to be a teacher.

I used to do a lot of speaking – even in Trafalgar Square alongside Oliver and Trevor – and those moments when South African comrades shouted 'Viva! Viva!' were unforgettable. There is so much evidence of people, really good people, who were determined to be part of a battle for people on another continent which is a long way away. At the conference in Harare one of the moments I remember ... we had a dinner on the first evening, and Oliver Tambo spoke. He came and gave me a big hug and said 'And how is my brother?' [referring to Glenys's husband, Labour Party leader Neil Kinnock]. I felt so privileged to be with all these wonderful brave people.

After the release of Nelson Mandela, Oliver and Adelaide Tambo went back to Pretoria, and Barbara Follet and I decided to go together to South Africa. When we arrived we heard loud singing and dancing and we saw lots of women. Adelaide hugged us and welcomed us to the new South Africa. When I said 'I'll just go to the hotel'. 'Oh no', she said, 'you're both going straight now to see the boss, you're just going straight there'. So we went to see Nelson – and I remember what it felt like to have him pour me a cup of tea in his house in Soweto. What a privilege it was before he was even President! Neil and I had in fact met him and Winnie in Stockholm, which was his first visit – and he had an opportunity to thank the Swedes for their support for the struggle. We were in the line of guests meeting them and we began telling him who we were. It was clear that he already knew who Neil and I were, and he said, 'I know what you've been doing, I know what all of you I have been doing'. He was so generous and so open and impressive. It's right that he's earned such huge respect across the world because of his willingness not to concede and give away what was important to him as the South African leader, but he also made sure that he had discussions with others and pulled in others so as to have changes as quickly as possible. I compare this now with Aung San Suu Kyi in Burma, where she is still struggling to deal with the conundrum of how not to concede and maintain a strong position. I think of him walking out and knowing exactly what he wanted to do, he had it all ready.

JH: Were there any particular campaigns that you were involved in?

GK: The boycott campaign, obviously, it mobilised so many people. One third of British people said when they were asked that they wouldn't buy South African products – what an achievement. I would always ask to speak to the manager, and I saw more and more people doing that, and saying 'Why haven't you stopped selling South African goods?'. We were criticised for the boycott, but in the end it was absolutely the right thing to do, because that's what helped to turn the corner – and it was down to Mike Terry, as were most initiatives we

took. The boycott was extremely important and it was something that I was very, very committed to. As I talk memories come flooding in ...

What I loved as well was this sense of being on a rollercoaster of different activities, and I don't remember ever not doing what they [the Anti-Apartheid Movement] asked me to do. I was never on the Board, but I was frequently in the offices and doing whatever I thought would help. We had amazing team spirit in the Movement, but also an understanding that we needed to pull in the British public. And they were persuaded by the arguments.

JH: Can you tell me more about the opposition to the Anti-Apartheid Movement? Was it manifested in the press? Was it manifested in public reactions? Was it manifested by the police, when you were doing the vigils ...

GK: Margaret Thatcher was determined that she would not make a single concession and she blocked Commonwealth sanctions. But it didn't play well for her because the Commonwealth and Sonny Ramphal [Commonwealth Secretary-General] were keen to take some action. There was evidence of spying on what we were doing and listening in and so on. I read in the *Independent* a while ago about the surveillance undertaken by the South Africans of what the Anti-Apartheid Movement was doing. Neil [Kinnock] asked her what she was going to do on sanctions, and she said 'You're a friend of terrorists'. And I think that they didn't know how to handle it, they didn't expect this big surge of British anger. People did increasingly see pictures and films showing what was happening. They saw people being brutally beaten, saw it on their [television] screens. I think the government was seen as blocking what was generally seen to be a much needed and appropriate response to what was happening. So those who campaigned against apartheid chipped away in effective ways, and secured a strong general protest which is not always easy to generate. It was an example of how people, ordinary people, can make a difference and can point out the difference between right and wrong.

JH: You talked about the high points, were there any low points over the years?

GK: Whenever you're involved with a campaign like that you have moments when you doubt whether it's going to be possible to overturn a powerful regime. I certainly did. We had our low moments, when we felt such was their power and such was their wealth, that it was going to be very difficult to shift them. Those were the low moments, and we were ashamed of the British position at that time. But otherwise, no, if you're in a campaign, a serious campaign about terrible things, you've got to really engage with it and you've got to – enjoy is the wrong word, but you have to have that strong commitment that drives you forward. We all worked together so well, and in the Labour Party our policy was absolutely clear and that was very encouraging. I didn't ever have to be ashamed or concerned about anything that the Labour Party did or said on the need to fight against apartheid. Now everybody knows what apartheid means – it means a cruel division which keeps people apart. It's still happening of course, it's not as if it has gone away – one of the biggest challenges we now face in the world is the have's and have-nots. There may be very wealthy African countries, but there isn't a fair distribution of wealth or opportunity in those countries. You can go to the biggest slum in Africa in Nairobi, where people don't have water or sanitation and then you get down to the bottom of the hill and you see large limousines driving past and where there are fancy hotels and restaurants. But the leadership and courage that they showed in South Africa was amazing, and the leadership that Nelson offered even from Robben Island was

always there.

JH: Can I ask some more specific questions? You were talking about the first Harare conference. Was it a deliberate policy to invite children from South Africa? Were they invited as the beneficiaries, as stakeholders ...?

GK: The children came on the platform in turn. They gave evidence and we sat with them on the platform. We knew that they were going to be willing to talk. I would say it was absolutely the defining moment, because the message got through to South Africa, it got through to the whole Southern African region and to the world that such children were the victims of the apartheid regime. It was entirely Trevor's initiative and the intention was to have the opportunity to highlight the abuse and violence of innocent children. Trevor I talked a lot about the conference because children's rights were hugely important to both of us. He said, 'Our prime objective is to work in defence of the children of South Africa' and that really resonated. And when the doctors and lawyers and other people came, brave South Africans came ... they came into Harare airport and came through without any problems. But it was very dangerous, we had all kinds of ruses for getting them there. And people were saying, 'Is this a country that is going to use its military weight and might against children?' Trevor and I thought it was the best way to draw attention to South Africa. You couldn't say any more that nothing was happening, because if you did, you were saying that a little girl in a wheelchair and a boy who's been beaten and told his story ... none of these were lying and you would be saying that this wasn't true. It was very harrowing, but if you feel you want to cry yourself, when a little girl is being so strong and a 17-year old boy was prepared to be tortured for his beliefs ... we felt that if they could do that, then the least we could do was to tell their stories. A key person was Victoria [Brittain] was always very active committed and very good. She has fought for the rights of women and children all her life

JH: Did that have a dynamic on the way people worked then?

GK: I think so, yes. Mike Terry was just such a great manager of people – I remember the boycott badges which were spread far and wide by Mike. He was so focused and he devoted his life to the Movement. He kept it all together, he was the one who co-ordinated what everybody was doing, recognised who had particular talents and so on. I am making him sound rather worthy – well he wasn't. Mike was great company and the loyalty he generated from everyone was rooted in real respect and affection too. And Bob Hughes was, and is, a fine and principled man who played such a pivotal role directing and guiding decision-making and policy. I have to pay tribute too to Abdul [Minty]. I remember we had a big anti-apartheid rally in South Wales where Neil was the MP and Abdul came to speak. We had the Archbishop of Wales on the platform too and Neil said 'Now tonight we have the holy and the minty!' (laughs)

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

GK: I don't think so.

JH: Are you sure? Well thank you very much for your time.

