Interview with Chitra Karve by Frances Freeman, 16th January 2014, for the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee project Forward to Freedom
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Fran Freeman: It's the 16th of January, I'm Frances Freeman and I'm about to interview Chitra Karve. It's for the Forward to Freedom anti-apartheid history project. Can you state your full name.

Chitra Karve: Chitra Karve

FF: And when and where were you born?

CK: Oh, it was a long time ago. I was born in 1959 in Mombasa, Kenya.

FF: What do or did you do for a living?

CK: I am a lawyer. What did I do? I have done very many different things. My very first proper job was with the Anti-Apartheid Movement in 1986, and after that I have done a variety of different things, including press publicity work, obviously legal work – a mixture of things in the law including discrimination law and human rights law. At the moment I am a member of the Parole Board, so I make decisions on the release of prisoners, and I'm also on the disciplinary committee at the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons.

FF: And have you been involved in any other political or campaigning activity apart from the Anti-Apartheid, such as a political party or a campaign, and can you tell us a bit about it?

CK: I was briefly a member of the Labour Party, but I resigned around various issues on policies of war with Iraq, so that was a while ago. But I have been politically active from a very young age. Probably I started off more with things like Third World First, World Development Movement, were attempting to work in colleges, so that's where I started, finding out a bit more about development issues, about the gap between the North and the South, and the third and the first world or however it was explained in those days, of fairness really, about how resources inevitably were shifting from one world to the other. I was highly aware of issues around racism and unfairness because of my childhood in Kenya and a little also because when I was a child in Kenya, I was sent away to boarding school in India. I was very much a fish out of water there, and I had a direct experience of what it is to be thought to be different. So I think as a child I became very aware about the unfairness of the way that people are treated because of the position that they're in. So by the time I became a student I was quite involved with feminist politics, and world development politics, I guess you could say – a very long answer to your question.

I had been involved with anti-racist organisations as well. I suppose I wouldn't like to name any political organisation, the reason being that at the time I was growing politically aware in England there was a real split between how people were approaching anti-racism, and I was uncomfortable with associating with almost any of them really. So while I would involve myself with campaigns, and was active in relation to individual issues, I found it difficult to become part of an organisation, because I didn't always agree with the way that whey were running things. I didn't agree with their approaches necessarily, but I was pretty active.

FF: So It comes from quite a personalised area then.

CK: Highly personalised, yes, and if the next question is why did I particularly focus on the Anti-Apartheid Movement, it seemed almost natural in that I had been doing a lot of work on racism, and it felt instinctively that this was the worst form of racism, since it was actually held up and

supported and in fact built by the state. So it seemed to me that, if I was an anti-racist, I had to go against the worst form of it. It was also in Africa and I've always had a huge soft spot, because I was born there, for anything happening in Africa, so it felt very right for me to get involved with the Anti-Apartheid Movement. In those days, this was when I was a college student, so we're talking 1981 or so, in my particular college, this was at Oxford Polytechnic, which is now Oxford Brookes University, there wasn't a very active AAM or anything. In fact, I don't think there was one in those days, so I used to do things through Oxford City – in fact most of my political activities were there. I spent quite a lot of time at Greenham Common as well during my time there. I don't know how much you know about Greenham Common. It was a military base for the USAF, and they started Cruise missiles there, and there was a huge, basically, women's movement to camp around the base in order to witness the difficulties and try to make the Common a Common again for the people, rather than a USAF military force for Cruise missiles, so that was a very live issue. And because it was at Greenham Common, which was not that far away from Oxford, I was heavily involved with that as well, so it wasn't that Anti-Apartheid was taking up all my time, I was actually doing quite a few other things as well. Studying was only a small part of what I did at college (laughs). So I was involved with the Anti-Apartheid Movement. There came a time, I think it was around 1985, that I realised that just being a student wasn't going to get me anywhere and I probably needed to start looking for a proper job. But I was very idealistic in those days, I didn't want a job just doing anything, I wanted a job that meant something to me. So I started looking for jobs that I thought would be appropriate and I was very very lucky in that two jobs came up. One was at the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and the other one was End Loans to Southern Africa, ELTSA, that was a small organisation that was basically campaigning for disinvestment activities, and I went for both the jobs and actually I got offered both, and I chose to work at the AAM and that basically changed the course of my life. Definitely. I stayed involved ever since.

FF: Yes, that's interesting. And were you in a committee or local group?

CK: Well, yes, when I first started at the Anti-Apartheid Movement I think I was the assistant, I think it was the PA to Mike Terry, the Executive Secretary, so my job was very much office based, doing all the minutes of the Executive Committee and the National Committee, and that was something that meant I was privy to a lot of the discussions among the leaders of the organisation, and started learning a little bit about how strategically organisations needed to operate in order to get what they wanted. So campaigning, what does it mean? How you organise it, what choices you make, these were all decisions that I was party to because I was sitting in on those meetings by the leaders of the organisation. Also, as I grew more confident and knowledgeable about everything I started to do quite a lot of the press work. For example at the time of Nelson Mandela Freedom at 70 campaign, I basically led on all the press and publicity surrounding that, by that time that I had been in that position for about a couple of years. But it was, that was my role, initially was PA, and also organising conferences and events. I think the first thing I did, almost in the days of starting, was to take part in the organisation of an international conference on apartheid which we hosted, the British Anti-Apartheid Movement hosted, but it was funded by the UN. So that was a very big conference, you know, with a lot of very important people coming over. And that was my first in into the very wide reach of the wider movement if you like, the international movement, India, America, a lot of the European countries, Ireland, a lot of the African countries, Canada, and they were all very active, they were sending people to the conference to try to decide what to do and try to go forwards. That was a UN conference that I had to organise.

FF: Can you remember anything else about the conference?

CK: Oh, difficult as it was so very long ago. I think what I can remember is, so we're talking now probably 1986, 1987, and things were beginning to change then. Prior to that apartheid was looking pretty solidly settled in, and it looked like there was going to be very little to shake the

government. I mean, the government seemed to do what ever they wanted, you know, states of emergencies and so on, and by the time we had that conference it looked like things were all so rosy in apartheid land. And it was becoming, I think, clear by then, that things would change and had to change. But it was just the trajectory – how fast it was going to be, how it was going to happen. Things were beginning … there was a lot of confidence, people were coming together to talk about a future, rather than just reacting to lots of horrible things that were happening. So I think that was something that I was about to learn, because I had been quite a reactive campaigner before then, you know, something happened, and I did something about it or you know, marched basically. And then suddenly you could see that actually, there could be a big change coming up here, and that's a very positive thing to start to think about. So I think that's the first time I started realising that, at the conference.

FF: And then do you think the campaigning began to shift after this?

CK: Well, it grew. The AAM, when I joined it I was only the eighth staff member there. So there were only eight of us and Mike Terry, the Executive Secretary, but the Movement itself was already quite large, it was big. Again, I keep talking about in those days, but it's true I think. There's a difference in how people engaged in political activity now and then. Then you became a member, you joined and paid you fees, and you joined things either as an individual or thorough your trade union or political party, but there was a lot of activism around. Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, and had been for a long long period of time. And so there were very many things that a lot of people didn't like about the regime in Britain, so lots of young people and lots of older people were involved with large movements. Another one that was around in those days was CND, the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which was a very big movement. So what it was was bringing together people from all different walks of life who got together either through a march or a specific campaign, and it was an amazing feeling being in that. Thousands and thousands and thousands of you all saying one thing, it was quite exciting.

And I think the Movement grew quite rapidly during the 1980s. Part of its strength was the way it was structured, because it had local groups all over the country. And they were just springing up all over the place where you'd get a small number of people, two or three people at first, starting up a local group, and then the next thing they knew they were like 50 strong, you know, meeting regularly and campaigning. And we were able to provide at the centre quite useful materials, leaflets, campaigns, badges, mugs, all sorts of merchandise, but also activities that people could do and also campaigns, going from the small stuff like signing a petition to the big stuff like organising a boycott of a particular store, like we had the boycott campaign on Shell, or the Barclays campaign, which was enormously successful because Barclays used to be the students bankers, they had branches near lots of universities, and when we got the National Union of Students working alongside us, it soon became pretty clear to Barclays that they were in deep trouble about their future, with so many students deciding to bank elsewhere. So the call was, 'Stop supporting apartheid', and that's a very easy call. When you think about the difficult calls we have to make now, where there's a lot of grey areas, isn't there, where there's bits of it that you think are OK and bits of it that you don't, it's quite difficult. Whereas with apartheid, well, who's going to say they support apartheid – well, some people did actually – but who's really going to be able to say, 'I think its OK'. So with apartheid, it was a very clear call and it was a very emotional call because it's very easy to link apartheid with racism, with unfairness, with slavery, because they were all true in apartheid. And I think even people who wouldn't normally be engaged in activities just could not bear it, had to sign up to doing something, even if that something was only not buying South African goods. And that also I think was a very successful call. And that led to the increase in numbers of people supporting us, because it's something every individual can do. You don't have to be very clever, you don't have to have loads of money, you don't have to belong to something where you have to go to meetings. Actually, everybody shops. And you go to shop, you

know, you say, ‘I’m not buying those oranges, I’m going to be buying those oranges’, and then you have to say to somebody, you have to make the point, ‘I’m not buying those oranges because they’re South African. Please will you stock Spanish oranges instead.’ So I think, the localism of it, the personalism of it, and the fact that it was such an obvious ask, are you going to support something as vicious as apartheid or not, meant that it just attracted masses of people.

So, OK, in terms of membership I think at our top we probably only had about 20,000 or 25,000 signed on members, but we had all the trade unions, we had trade union affiliates, we had regional trade union meetings, we had local trade union branches. We had political parties (mostly Labour), but also others, and huge numbers of individuals. So it was very very very big in terms of its reach. And then we had other groups like Artists Against Apartheid started up, Lawyers against Apartheid Teachers Against Apartheid, so they all worked within their professional fields and started talking to people that they worked with and also assimilating information. Teachers Against Apartheid must have been very powerful, for instance, in their schools for instance, you know, giving information knowing about what was happening to children in education in apartheid South Africa.

I’m talking a lot ... so I also think what is amazing and exciting is what was happening in the region. I think that I’m very conscious of, as somebody from ACTSA [Action for South Africa] now, we take our steer from things that are happening in the region. We're not the people who say we know what you want and we don’t want to carry on that colonial benign, you know, ‘We’re sitting here in a grown-up democracy and know what you want and what you need’. We never did that and neither did Anti-Apartheid. The Anti-Apartheid Movement when it very first started had some of its founder members, exiles, party leaders, people who had fled apartheid, who had been leading the anti-apartheid struggle from within, so they knew what was needed and what the call was. So we took our approach, strategy and support, we took from what was happening in the region. What was happening in the region was amazing, with the most incredible leaders. I mean, where else would you look to find somebody like Mandela’s speech at the Rivonia trial, things like Ahmed Kathrada had said, things like Govan Mbeki had said, these were leaders of the struggle inside the country, from the ANC mainly. And you listen to them and you read them and you think these are visionaries for the future that ... you know, somebody young like me, I was hungry for someone who could give leadership and they were leaders, they were amazing people. And working in the Anti-Apartheid Movement I was privileged to meet some of these people, because some of them were exiles and many of them were either living in London or England, or came through London or England if they were living elsewhere in exile, so we regularly met with them and listened to them – that’s all it took. It was very easy to get involved in many ways. It took over my life ...

So that was when I was working there, and you talked about committees. It was organised in a structure such that there was an officers’ group, that was the leader, there was an Executive, chaired at the time by Bob Hughes, now Lord Hughes, I think he was a shadow Cabinet minister at the time, and he chaired the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Also there was a treasurer, vice chairs and so on. Richard Caborn was involved and he went on to become a Cabinet minister later on, in the Labour government. Bernie Grant was involved, I don’t know if you know who he is – Bernie Grant was a dearly loved MP in Tottenham. There were some people in the Executive Committee, they led the organisation. There was a National Committee as well which was a much wider regional base, where people who had certain rights could send representatives, and I think in the end it was hundreds strong, including people from all over the country. There were also sub-committees of the Executive Committee, for example, there was the Trade Union Committee which ran and discussed campaigns, that’s what trade unions do to support the struggle, and there was a Women’s Committee. And around the time that I started they had just established what they called the Black and Ethnic Minorities Committee, because there had been quite a lot of discussion in the Anti-Apartheid Movement that it was actually quite white led, and it was, when you think about it. So there had been some sort of soul searching about why and so on, so they agreed to start a

committee to try and encourage ... to think about how to encourage the involvement of black people in the Anti-Apartheid Movement. So that had just started I think around the time that I had just started working there. As a staff member I wasn't on any committee, you really couldn't be, these were things that were done by the activists. But I was aware of it and I was conscious of its work because of my personal affiliations for doing anti-racist work and also as a feminist and an anti-racist. So when I left the AAM as an employee, I straightaway went on to those committees, so I could carry on my campaigning, but this time as a committee member, as an activist, not a staff member. So I was heavily involved with the Black and Ethnic Minorities Committee and the Women's Committee, and eventually became chair of the Black and Ethnic Minorities Committee. And around the time when I became chair, I'm struggling with dates here, so I left the AAM in 1990 and I joined the Black and Ethnic Minorities Committee, and I think it was about a year later I became chair, so around 1991 it must be, we also changed the name, because I decided Black and Ethnic Minorities Committee and I think everybody else didn't really like the name, it didn't say anything, so we decided to call ourselves the Black Solidarity Committee and that certainly made it a lot more active, in terms that it is a very acting phrase. And we also had lots of discussions within the committee about what did black activism actually mean. Were we really relevant in the AAM and anti-racist struggles in Britain, and whether we should be relevant to those struggles in Britain. There were lots of different opinions. Some members of the committee who had come wholly from an anti-racist background thought that it should be wholly involved, in fact affiliated to groups such as the Anti-Racist Alliance, or something like that, which existed in those days. There were others that thought we should only be focused on was what was happening in the region, Southern Africa, and that we shouldn't really get distracted from that. And there were those of us like me, somewhere in the middle, who thought actually we can't ignore what is happening in this country, and there's a reason for that because there's a link. And actually, it's no bad thing to not ignore it, as you are bringing more people in that way, so actually it's good for both types of campaigning. You know, there's the anti-racist campaigning, all the solidarity campaigning and the anti-apartheid campaigning. So we had those discussions, and we did face criticism. The Anti-Apartheid Movement was facing criticism from some anti-racist organisations about it being led by white people and everything, so this was an attempt to respond to those criticisms but also try to open up a little bit more. And it was a debate (laughs), I don't think I always agreed with what the Anti-Apartheid Movement did. But even when I was working in the Anti-Apartheid Movement and I was part of the Free Nelson Mandela campaign I managed to do small things in the big events that we had. For example, the Clapham Common music festival, which was huge, 250,000 people attended it. This was in 1988 I think,[1] and Artists Against Apartheid worked with us to put on this amazing festival and it was the first of its kind, frankly. I did the press work for it. And it was important that when we said something, we said it to the nation, we said it to everybody that it was relevant to the whole of the country, so that when we started to become more popular, when I did the press work, I tried to make sure that the smaller black press were invited, because actually they were small. And you know, it was very easy to just get the *Telegraph*, *The Times*, the *Guardian*, the BBC, I don't think Channel 4 even existed in those days, but what ever existed – ITV and some of the international press there and not even allow *The Voice* for example or the African Press or Caribbean press. So actually I did make an effort to make sure they got into things, but that was a small start. But I think there were criticisms around the involvement of black people and whether it was relevant to them, that we did try to make lots and lots of efforts to try to do something about it in the Black Solidarity Committee, only partially successful I suspect.

FF: How did you feel about the fact that the Anti-Apartheid Movement was very white led?

CK: Well, how did I feel about it? I kind of understood how it had got there. So I didn't so much have an issue about how it had got there – what frustrated me a little is why it couldn't change. OK, you got where you are, historically that's fine, but we're moving on into a different world. And I was kind of working in two committees at the time, because it wasn't just white led, it was male led,

heavily male led. And so for me it was like, OK, but times are changing – you have really got to be more open. But the difficulty was that I think being part of an organisation like that and having to remain in a large group of people to campaign in a targeted fashion, I think the Executive Committee did actually become quite controlling. And so it wasn't an easy dialogue.
I think they certainly, in their hearts, recognised that they wanted to make things a lot more open, but also wanted to keep control. I think it's a natural reaction, but I'm saying that having lived through those times and now in this time … but I think at the time I was just rather frustrated (laughs). And I'm thinking, I was looking at some old letters, I've still got some copies that I was writing to Bob [Hughes] from the Women's Committee and the Black Solidarity Committee, and they are really cross letters, you know, saying, 'Why didn't you have this and why didn't you say so and so', and you know, 'Let's change the structure of this campaign'. Yes, it was an interesting, quite fun time really, when I look back on it. But I think many black people were frustrated about not feeling maybe as engaged with the AAM as maybe they wanted to. And I think when I started doing more focused work around that, I realised that actually many black people, and from the Caribbean countries who were very strongly active in the anti-racist movements in England here, had a visceral, a very highly emotional personal relationship with what was happening in South Africa. And I don't think that the Anti-Apartheid Movement recognised that or gave them a way in which to use that relationship effectively, because one of the things we said is that you shouldn't make any contacts because we were boycotting and calling for the isolation of apartheid state South Africa. Now isolation means you don't visit, you don't tourist, you don't do business with, you don't do anything with that country, you isolate it. And that call was a call that came from South Africa, it came from the leaders of the struggle there, so we repeated it, and called for it and supported it. But the end result was that people who needed to make direct contact in order to feel personally involved felt that we weren't helping them with that, and we weren't actually, because that wasn't what we wanted. So I think there was a difference in how many black activists would have liked to get involved. Some of them even said, 'I want to go and fight', or they at least wanted to go meet with the fighters and have conversations with them, and we were going, 'No, that's not our role'. So I don't think we spoke to each other as effectively as we could have, but I can now understand it, looking back, because our approaches were slightly different.

FF: Yes, I can see how that could happen. And how did your role change when you moved to the Women's Committee and the Black Solidarity Committee?

CK: Oh, the Women's Committee. They were very different animals those two. The Women's Committee's main aim was to disseminate information about what was happening with women and women in the struggle in particular, because that was an area that wasn't talked about much, and women in South Africa, in particular, and also don't forget Namibia and other countries affected by apartheid, so Angola, Mozambique and so on. Many many women in South Africa who were working were working as domestics in white South African homes or working in factories doing things like sewing, making clothes and so on. They weren't as well organised as some of the men, because also if you're working in a house, there is very little in terms of colleague solidarity, you know, you're on your own. You might be the nurse or nanny for little kids, or the cleaner in the house or something, you're on your own. So it was much difficult for them, quite frankly, to organise collectively and also be able to call to do things collectively. And also, you know, many women, their husbands and fathers and so on were migrant workers, so the women and the children would live in the village and they would hardly ever see their men. Their men would be off in the mines or factories in large towns, and the women would stay behind. They would stay there put up in barracks there basically, and they would only be allowed home every so often. I don't know how often that was, but maybe once or twice a year, hopefully more often than that. So they were isolated from any way of organising. So many women, I think their voices were so strong but were not being heard. And anything that they were doing or their campaigns that they were running were not being talked about. So the Women's Committee was very focused on trying to get that

voice known here at least. So we used to have a newsletter called *Malibongwe* and that tried to put forward what was happening in relation to women in South and Southern Africa and we were working with the ANC Women's League UK section here, and some of those amazing women are still here today and still helping out with the South African High Commission, I still see them when I go over there. And they would give us information about what was happening – were there any trade unions that were supporting women or campaigns? – because many of the pass law campaigns that were run by women, some of the calls to boycott certain things were also run by women in South Africa. They were active, it was just not always talked about or heard about. So yes, giving them the profile that they deserved and recognised, and also trying to explain some of the barriers that they had to organising. And also celebrating the fact that in the Freedom Charter, which is an amazing document, especially considering the time that it was written, how open it is to all types … and one of the things it says very clearly at the beginning is non-sexist, you know, a non-racist and a non-sexist South Africa. And we're talking something that was in the '50s that was being created, so really really far-reaching stuff, so celebrating that and trying to make that a reality.

In actual fact a lot of the discussions that we were trying to have with the ANC Women's League were interesting, because we as feminists thought that there ought to be a particular feminist or women's role within the struggle, and they were saying, 'No, actually the struggle at the moment is with apartheid, we can't be making divisions between men and women, we need to all pull together at this time and come the revolution, things will change'. So we were having those types of discussions with them, because some of us were like, 'No no, you're in big trouble now. You need to do something about the sexist men now, surely. This is the time of change', and they would say 'No, at the moment we're focusing on apartheid'. So it was kind of interesting dialogue with them. So yes, that was the Women's Committee, quite a different focus really, yes. Anything else?

FF: I guess that's kind of partly covering the general dynamic between the committee and groups across the board, but what about within the committee?

CK: Yes, I think that one of the issues we did face was that the Executive Committee in its wisdom decided to … I think that they sort of wanted to support the Women's Committee, but they were a little suspicious about what we were doing, and it was decided in the Executive Committee that they would appoint people on the Executive to sit on these committees. So yes, true enough there was a person on the Executive Committee that would sit in on the Trade Union Committee, and therefore was the link if you like to the centre, and the organisation that ran the AAM. And so they, in their wisdom, chose a man to sit on the AAM Women's Committee, and (laughs) that created a lot of fury. And I think the reason for that was that there weren't very many women on the Executive committee at the time, they were spread pretty thin (laughs). I think in fact that there was only one of them actually, Margaret, who was already on the Women's Committee, so they couldn't choose her. So they had to have somebody someone else (laughs). So the poor old man on the Executive Committee, Alan Brooks, he's dead now, was appointed. How embarrassing it must have been for him. You know, he turns up at the Women's Committee and we were all just sitting there thinking, you know, should we just boycott this committee, or should we stay but all just sit there and actually play ball to a certain extent (laughs). You know, we made it very clear that we were not happy, but he tried his best to be as unobtrusive as possible (laughs), just sitting there taking notes, and us saying you spy! You spy for the Executive Committee. It was all very silly. I don't even know why they did it. You know, could it be done today? I don't know, the silliest things coming round, I don't know. It happened quite a while ago – maybe it could happen today, a man being put on the Women's Committee, talking about women's issues (laughs). We were waiting for a white person to be put on the Black Solidarity Committee, but that didn't happen, no, I think they decided not to do that. But the original chair of the Black Solidarity Committee was a member of the Executive Committee, Dan Thea, so that was alright. And then afterwards, when I took over as

chair, I think we could be trusted a bit more, because by then we had been running for a few years and we had at least one member of the Executive Committee, Suresh Kamath, who is treasurer of ACTSA actually and still very heavily involved, he was also a member of the Black Solidarity Committee. And I think Lela Kogbara, who was chair of ACTSA until not very long ago, until I took over, was also a member of the Black Solidarity Committee, I think she was a member of the Executive Committee in those days. So there was enough crossover that they felt that they had enough spies – I'm using the word loosely (laughs).

[Some omitted]

FF: Yes, and were there any more inner tensions that you can describe between or within groups?

CK: Any more tensions, well, there were political tensions and I think that in terms of the Black Solidarity Committee it was quite interesting because black consciousness was a big part of the anti-racist struggle here and in America in particular, from the '60s over in the States and drifting over to the UK, black consciousness was beginning to become, well, was quite powerful. And it was centring around the recognition that it was OK to be black. It's brilliant, because it's an indication of how far we've come, because even when I say it it's an odd thing to say, I mean, why would I even need to say that? But in those days, black people were so much recognising themselves as second class citizens in this country that recognising it's OK to be black was a big deal. And not only that it's OK to be black, but that it's positively brilliant to be black. And that was quite lively around the time that the AAM was doing quite a lot of campaigning around things. And it sort of focused a little bit on what was happening in South Africa as well, because the African National Congress was by far the largest mass movement in South Africa, it just was, and there's a truth to that – nobody can say anything else, I mean, look at the numbers. But there were other significant political organisations, black-led, that had a different voice. One of them was the Pan-African Congress [PAC], and it had more of a black consciousness type philosophy behind it. The ANC was very much a political church, non-racist, there were black people, white people, all attempting to live together, that was the aim, majority decision and so on ... But the PAC was much more clearly based on, you know, white people came, took our country, and they need to leave, and leave the country to us. And that's a very different approach. And I think that those individuals here who aligned themselves more closely with the PAC stance, and there were a lot of them, and a lot of them were anti-racists, and black people that were engaged with that political activity here did not particularly value the fact that the AAM worked so closely with the ANC, so there were some issues and tensions around that. The PAC had what's called observer status on the National Committee. They didn't attend very many meetings, but they could, if they wanted to attend them. And those were where global strategy was discussed every year, so they could have come.

So it's absolutely true that we played more attention to the ANC and that we took our line, often, from them, and I don't think we should have any concerns about that because they were by far the biggest ... And I think what they were looking for was more realistic as well. You know, you can never tell how things would have gone if the call would have been that all white people should leave. I don't think that would work. You can't say and actually, I didn't think about it at the time, but my respect for the black consciousness movement and where it had come from is that at the end of the day it in itself used colour as a bar for something. And that was useful for the time because you needed to say, you know, black is fine, black is beautiful, black is good, that was powerful and it was important, but then you need to move on from there, and you need to have a view of colour not being a bar for anything for anybody. And I suppose that was why I was a bit careful about them [the PAC] then, but I couldn't articulate it until a bit later on, but I was instinctively worried about it, and instinctively worried about their position. And there was a lot of support for them here, and there was worry about it, and there were tensions and there were fights, and you know some of the old AAM groups actually splintered off from the AAM because of that support. One of them

was the City AA, the one that put on the 24-hour vigil every day outside South Africa House during the apartheid days and spent a lot of energy doing that. So yes, it did lead to some divisions, but actually, the wider movement was pretty much where it was, quite stable.

FF: Yes, brilliant. And, you've mentioned some campaigns that you were involved in, but can you think of any others you wanted to talk about?

CK: I think the Freedom at 70 campaign. The reason why it's so huge in my mind was because I was very much a part of it, right from the beginning. And it was like, eight of us sat round a room talking about what we could do. And I think the focus around one person – this was something we had to think about quite a lot – why should we focus it all around one individual when this was about a whole society? And was it a good idea to do that, or was it actually negative to do that? I think that's still something that's been talked about now, you know, why focus on just one person as there are people who would quite rightly say that there are quite a few leaders out there, women and men who as a result on just focusing on Mandela, have not been able to engage as fully and internationally and their own politics, because we've made a bit of a demi-god about one man. So I don't really seem to know the answer to that. I mean, I think it was an effective campaign. It was the right thing to do for a whole host of reasons. Number one is that he said and did the most marvellous things. It was very easy, because of what he said and did. He was an easy person to talk about and sell and he had an image that was very easy for people to understand. And he was a leader, he absolutely was one of the main leaders of the ANC at the time, whether he was doing it from inside prison or from outside. He absolutely was one of the main leaders, it wasn't like, pick somebody. And it allowed people to focus on things, and people like to focus on things to campaign on. So when, for example, there was the Sharpeville massacre[2] when children people were murdered in the streets, that was a focus. Children were murdered, you know, and there was that amazing photo of Hector Peterson carrying that little boy who was shot dead, and I mean, that just was everywhere. Because its hard to focus on a million people being affected by apartheid, but actually being able to talk about one person's journey and what they're doing is a powerful thing to do, so the Free Nelson Mandela campaign did give us a number of things to focus on. One is the fact that he was a prisoner, the issue around political prisoners, and the fact that most leaders were either in prison or had to flee, and the other is the fact that he was a lawyer and educated and articulate, and that he was giving out loads of information and while he was in prison he would be giving out all the information, because he had spoken so brilliantly at the Rivonia trial, which was recorded, so we had that. So that all became very very easy to do. And the fact that he was getting older in prison – so the Freedom at 70 campaign, which wasn't successful, because he wasn't free at 70, but it was the Nelson Mandela Freedom at 70 campaign, it just looked good, it was a good call. And it brought together a whole bunch of people. It really did.

Jerry Dammers, who was the founder of Artists Against Apartheid, I think it was around that time, just before he released 'Free Nelson Mandela', so that that captured the audience, and it captured the idea that ... the song was so brilliant, and he was well known, you know, the Specials were well known, so that all became part of the journey for young people. The music was good too, and he was central to putting on the Clapham Common festival that we were putting on, and there were stars of all sorts coming, you know, Jim Kerr and Simple Minds, Sting, they all were there, and he brought them together, did a marvellous job, and it became a big media thing as well because it was easy to focus it all on one person, and getting people talking about it. And you know, Freedom at 70 sounds great, doesn't it, because you would think you ought to be out of prison by the time that you're 70, especially if your a political prisoner, so it just honed us in on one individual for the greater good. It was an amazing but very hard time, you know, I don't recall sleeping much those days. And the Anti-Apartheid Movement had grown hugely, so we had swollen in terms of staff numbers as well. I think when I left there were 22 staff, and huge members of volunteers, and we had taken over quite a few of the buildings on Mandela Street. You know what, it was changed

when we moved there, it used to be called Selous Street. And I think Tony, who is now he Director of ACTSA, I think he might have been leader of the Council at that time and assisted that change to occur, isn't that amazing? Anyway so Mandela Street, so we took it over, it was this little alleyway with plenty of empty buildings, and we just spread. And there were like, placards everywhere for our marches, and you know, banners, and merchandise all over the place, it was the most exciting time to live in. I'm very glad that I … and very privileged to have had that opportunity. Yes, very very privileged. The Free Nelson Mandela campaign was second to none in terms of its reach, and that's because we did lots of different things. There was the walk, there was runs, there was marches, there was the concert, there was petitions, people were doing things locally, letter writing for political prisoners. Oh, it was just amazing, everybody got involved.

FF: Incredibly active.

CK: It was, and it was a really good feeling, to feel that. And the country was pulling together, the press were on our side, which was very unusual, most campaigners, they get loads of negative press, but by then they were coming to us and they were hungry … what are you doing? So it was easy for me if I was doing press work because they just wanted to know what we were doing, they were first in. You know, big pictures, big banners, yes, big big marches, thousands and thousands and thousands. Like you'd start at 11 o'clock, and you'd still be starting at 2 o'clock, because it was such a big march that people hadn't even started, where as at the other end they had come to an end and there were still lots of other people (laughs). That's how big it was, I can't even think. Like nowadays we just don't have anything that big, do we? Perhaps against the Iraq wars those were quite big, but I don't know if they were that big though.. These were huge ... we used to have coaches and they would come from everywhere, and London would just be stopped for the day because there were people from Manchester and Yorkshire coming in and there would be coaches parked everywhere blocking the roads.

FF: And what was the government's reaction?

CK: Oh they hated us (laughs). It wasn't so much the government, but it was Margaret Thatcher. I mean, in those days she was in control of it, it was all about her. I think she was hugely controlling. We did meet with different ministers but I think that they were very much being puppets, and she was the puppet master. And she was adamant that she and Britain was going to do nothing to change anything. And actually as a result lent direct support to the South African apartheid regime, and in that way supported it, because you're almost saying that everything they were doing is OK. 'Yes, allow trade, yes, allow investment, in fact support it.' She fought against the Commonwealth attempt, because there was a strong Commonwealth attempt, and I think this was in 1998, to throw South Africa out of the Commonwealth, and to make them, to step up sanctions and to have sanctions.[3] And she fought against that and fought against that and fought against that, and I think when she came out she actually made a sign with her fingers and she said, 'We've managed to do a tiny little bit'. So you know, she was so anti any change, she was propping up the government, there was no doubt about it, because by doing nothing you were propping it up. I suppose she was doing more than nothing because she actually had visitors coming, state visits from the president and so on, so she was definitely supporting the status quo. That helped in a way, because it gave you an enemy (laughs). So we thought, OK, we have our enemy here and we have our enemy there. So we knew what we were up against (laughs). Yes, they hated us.

FF: OK, it's lucky you had the press really.

CK: Yes, we had some negative press, but it's lucky we had very positive press towards the end, very positive.

FF: Yes, and let's ask, looking back, are there any other incidents that particularly stand out?

CK: The campaigns that stand out? The campaigns or events? Because obviously one of the things that stands out is the first Wembley concert, which was also the first of its kind. And it was (sighs) what can I say, so I was still working there at the time, and again it was a time of no sleep, and what I do know is that the members of the organisation were extremely concerned, as there were a lot of issues around finance and they had to put down payments on it, whether they were going to get the artists, and again Jerry Dammers was key in making sure that we got big artists on board. And he was very clear that we had to have good black artists as well, not just the local people. This was an international stage now, and it was the most remarkable event. And even now when I talk to people they always go, wow you were involved in that? That was amazing! 'Cos they recall it very much focused around the Free Nelson Mandela song, and then a huge number of artists. So once two or three signed up they all wanted to be on it. So we had Annie Lennox, Dire Straits, Whitney Houston, and of course Jerry and Simple Minds and all sorts. I think Sting couldn't make it, but he was involved with other stuff as well, he did do things. Tracey Chapman got a big break that day, I think the sound system went down and they had to have just one person with a guitar of something and poor thing, she was there and so I think she just got thrown on stage – 'Do something!' And she did and she was brilliant. And that was her (laughs). Yes, we had Stevie Wonder and it was amazing, yes, it was amazing.

Actually, I didn't see much of the concert because of how you were when you were doing the press. I think I was back stage most of the time, so I couldn't see anything. The only time I managed to catch glimpses is when I went into the box to get Mike because something was going on or we needed to get interviews of something. And they were in the box facing the stage, the best box, the royal box you know, and then I could see things, glimpses of stuff going on. But actually most of the time I was walking the corridors in Wembley. And sleepless for days, I suspect.

FF: Yes, it must have been hard work.

CK: I can't remember the hard work, because you're just buoyed up. I mean, the buzz, it's just huge, working on something like that. Now I get tired all the time working but in those days I must have been on the edge of something all the time, like collapse (laughs), but I don't recall being like that. I remember being happy and energetic.

FF: And that leads nicely on, if you could describe the high points and the low points of the AAM?

CK: I guess I don't have such a historical perspective as I came in in the '80s, and prior to that it was another organisation, so I can't tell you anything except for the last few years, frankly. And the high points for me were also some of the low points. So I think, it's a horrible thing to say, but I think that it's inevitable. So like the Sharpeville massacre became a high point for the campaign, do you know what I mean, because I don't mean it to sound the way it sounds, but what it did, it angered people so much that children were being targeted in this way. All they wanted was a decent education, that's what they were campaigning about, and they were being shot. Those things and the times when people were about to be executed, the huge upsurge of activity around that time, which obviously you had to be involved with, were high points.

There were some others, working with Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, working with Mike Terry and Bob Hughes, these were people that I learnt a lot from – it's very sad that so many of them are now dead. Meeting people like Oliver Tambo was extremely important to me and made a huge difference, Archbishop Tutu, I met people that in your wildest dreams you don't think that you're going to meet and then you do. And then finally meeting Nelson Mandela himself, where you begin to realise that actually these are just people. You can be people like these people. They're not

gods, they're real, and you can touch them, talk to them, they have failings, they too will do the odd wrong thing, but they are pretty amazing and magical and they are proving that human beings can be amazing, that they don't have to be extraordinary. So I think that those were high points for me and those are the things that I've carried with me, these individuals. Because the other stuff I just take as luck – being involved with huge campaigns and lots of people calling for the same thing and being involved in such a big movement, is just amazingly lucky. But to meet with people that I met with like the Tambos, like Sisulu, like Archbishop Trevor Huddleston, made me the person that I am today. So I think that's what I learnt, and that's what I take away with me.

FF: Yes, and are there any low points to the campaigning?

CK: The low points were those bits where we fought internally, actually, because some of the fighting got a bit bitter, and not necessarily the ones that I was involved with, but the stuff about the City Anti-Apartheid Group and the struggle with the whole issue around the PAC. I wonder sometimes if we could have been a bit more open and a bit more engaged and a bit less suspicious of them – simply because they were coming from a different alternative political point of view. We seemed to spend a lot of our energy keeping them out. I don't know, maybe I'm being a bit naive and maybe a discussion with them would have led to nothing, but I think they did soak up a lot of internal energy and maybe we could have spent that in a better way. I think I am perenially sad that we couldn't engage the Black Solidarity Committee in engaging more people than we did, and I think that that's a fair criticism of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, and that would be a low point with me as well, as I was actively involved in trying to make a difference in that and it didn't really work. But I think we tried – I mean what we did was a good effort, but probably wasn't good enough.

FF: Can you describe them?

CK: Yes, well we tried to have seminars where we would discuss the issues and try to be open and transparent to discuss and talk about what those issues were. So we went to places like Brixton, where there was a lot of activity around black organisations and voluntary organisations there. We went there, had meetings with them to discuss joint campaigning work to see if we could do anything together. We engaged with the Anti-Racist Alliance, we engaged with, I think, the National Assembly it was called, black assembly, but we engaged with these organisations absolutely. And that's where I met, for example, Lee Jasper, who was a black activist and very involved in lots of the organisations during those times and we met with him to try to encourage him to work with us. It was a tricky relationship, but also it was good in a way because now many years later I get on fine with him. But you know, in those days discussions had to be had to see how we could work better together. And you know, towards the end we did do small things together, we jointly hosted ANC youth talks to local organisations and community groups, so we did do some joint work. But much of it was talk (laughs).

FF: And looking back what are your feelings about you involvement in the anti-apartheid campaigns?

CK: Looking back, I would say that my involvement – and I'm very glad that I was employed by them, I learnt so much about working with others in an intense situation and learnt also about myself. And I also learnt to understand how the situation of racism fits in a wider picture in an unfair society. And I think I've come to the conclusion that it isn't about race or gender or anything else, but it is about power. When you get an imbalance of power you can focus it on one individual or a group of individuals but actually it's all about power. And unless people at the top are prepared to give away power or to share it, there will always be unfairness and oppression in society. So I took that away from that.

FF: Excellent. Is there anything else that you would like to add yourself?

CK: Only that now, as Chair of Action for Southern Africa, I have continued to make sure that that part of the region continues to be heard here and that we continue to work in solidarity with them because we mustn't forget that. I don't even know what democracy means any more, but this whole idea of people engaging directly with representatives, it is very new in that part of the world, and I don't just mean South Africa. And what we mustn't do is make an assumption that that struggle is over, because it is not, it is actually just beginning. And that's quite scary when you actually think about it. Yes, so I will continue to be involved and engaged and so many people still are.

FF: Yes it's fascinating how many people still are – from all of these interviews. Well excellent, OK, I think that is everything, let's see, thank you very much, Chitra.

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[1] The Clapham Common Festival took place on 28 June 1986.

[2] Chitra is referring to the Soweto uprising here, which took place in 1976.

[3] South Africa left the Commonwealth in 1961. Chitra is referring to the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Nassau in 1985.