Interview with Baroness Lynda Chalker by Christabel Gurney, 31 March 2014, for the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee project Forward to Freedom
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Christabel Gurney: This is Christabel Gurney on 31 March 2014. Lady Chalker, could you first just for the record tell us where you were born.

LC: I was born Lynda Bates on the 29th April 1942 in Hitchin, Hertfordshire.

CG: Thank you. As you grew up, when did you first become aware of the situation in Southern Africa, and South Africa in particular?

LC: South Africa in particular, probably in the early to mid '50s at school, because I had a friend from school who had been living in Botswana and she came to our school in Britain and I learnt a lot from her.

CG: Thank you. And were you at all involved in any kind of activity around Southern Africa before you became the Minister of State in the Foreign Office?

LC: No, only with African students with whom I was at university. I was very well aware of how marginal their livelihoods were because they could not access educational opportunities in their own countries very often, nor in South Africa, and we had a lot of discussions and I participated in those. But I really learned about Africa from my friends.

CG: Thanks. I think when you were moved to the Foreign Office your first responsibility was Europe …

LC: No, I moved to the Foreign Office on 10th January 1986 and I was responsible for all European matters, for Africa and the Commonwealth right from the day I began.

CG: What were the main issues that came across your desk in those early years, from 1986 until 1990?

LC: Let's restrict this to Africa, because you don't want to write about the European Union, although that took up a lot of my time. Obviously the existence of apartheid and how did we persuade the Africans, the South Africans and the National Party, that they had to change, matters in Zimbabwe, in Zambia, all the countries surrounding South Africa, who wanted to get that change. So I was very well aware that there had to be a change and the question was how to persuade people to get there, which is why I very quietly and rather, perhaps too silently for some, went about making friends with people you would never dream of my meeting. The critical thing was at the time, because there was a division within the Conservative Party, that I could continue to see those friends, some of whom I met in Alexandra and other places like that, all the way through the time I was responsible for Africa, and I succeeded fairly well. I think there were one or two difficult questions asked, but I got to know a lot of people. I went to people's private

homes, where members of Black Sash arranged for me to meet people, and diplomats too.

CG: Thank you. Could you say a bit more about that, about the tensions and also about the people you met. In particular did you meet Oliver Tambo?

LC: Oh, yes, lots of times.

CG: Did you meet him off the record, not just as a government minister?

LC: Initially, I met Oliver Tambo off the record. I then gained backing to meet Oliver Tambo up in Muswell Hill and I used to go up and have a coffee with him, a cup of tea with him and with Adelaide. I eventually, I mean it obviously did become known, but it was a matter of some battle. Geoffrey Howe agreed I should meet him privately quite easily, and of course he had been out in 1986 to South Africa. But I met Thabo Mbeki, I met Cyril Ramaphosa, a lot of very famous names today, who were persona non grata, I suppose, with Margaret, but I quietly went around meeting them. I had a particularly good friend, a doctor in Alexandra, Dr Wilson, and I can remember going there in '86 or '87 and suddenly finding a whole lot of people who just said 'Oh, you're here, we want to talk to you'. So that's what I did, but very quietly …

CG: Can you say something about how official government attitudes, including those of Margaret Thatcher, changed … ?

LC: She hated apartheid, there's no question Margaret Thatcher hated apartheid, but she found it very difficult to get her mind round what had to happen. So I think I was quite useful in my own way. Denis disapproved, I remember that quite clearly. We are going back a long way now, but I have got some notes. It's quite clear that I had a job to do, but it was a quiet job, and I never want to boast about it. But I always remember the first time that I had to meet F W de Klerk, who is now a great friend, but was not a great friend when I met him in 1988. I said 'If you are going to ever rule this country peacefully, you have to have a dialogue'. And me talking about a dialogue was about as far as what some people in the National Party wanted as we were from the moon. But I just kept at it quietly and I used the contacts I built up in my private life – my private life was very important to maintain and help. I believe Michael Young in his book refers to some contacts, but I couldn't even tell Michael Young, who was, let's say, on the side of the angels, and certainly on the side of anti-apartheid, I couldn't tell Michael all the things I was doing because I had to do them privately.

CG: Thank you, that's very interesting. Why do you think Margaret Thatcher was so hostile to sanctions?

LC: I think it was partly that she thought it would damage the economy of the United Kingdom, and after all her first responsibility was as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. I can remember arguing about this at certain times and saying, 'No, you have to give a wake-up call'. But the way to give the wake-up call, in which I was somewhat

influenced by my faith and by a number of clergy that I knew, it was to get in there, listen and talk to people, and that way make … and I mean I will always remember the first time I met Thabo. It was at Samora Machel's funeral in Mozambique, and Thabo came up to me after – it was pouring with rain and we all got drenched going to the – I don't know whether you know Maputo, but where he was buried, the Tomb of the Heroes. And he came up to me afterwards, and he said 'I didn't think you would be here'. I said 'Of course, I'm here', and I said 'And I'll see you in South Africa as well, if you want'. And he looked at me and he said 'You live dangerously'. The point was to make the contacts and to keep the contacts, and in fact Sir Robin Renwick and Sir Anthony Reeve as High Commissioners were very good, they worked very hard behind the scenes. I was part of a team that were trying to change things. I think also Margaret didn't really understand perhaps how many able thinking future politicians there were in South Africa, partly because all she had ever known, probably, was white South Africans. I was the lucky one, I got to know so many people.

CG: Could you say, in those years … government policy, not your particular attitude, but what do you think, what did they want, what sort of outcome were they looking for in South Africa? As you probably know, we in the Anti-Apartheid Movement were deeply distrustful of what the government was trying to do, even after 1990. Buthelezi was wooed … the British ambassador accompanied Buthelezi in 1993 to London. There was also a feeling that they feared a fully democratic constitution …

LC: Well, there was a lot of fear. I can remember – I have a home in South Africa now and I invested in young people there – I think they were very afraid of violence and of course burning tyres and all the other nasty things that happened, let alone people being shot dead, and the way the police reacted, was an abhorrence to many in the Party, but they couldn't see their way round it. I have to say that in those early talks with people in the National Party, I mean Pik Botha as well as F W [de Klerk], and then particularly with Roelf Meyer, who I got to know well and still know and see, I'm glad to say. Some of those people were beginning to say, 'We have to do it differently'. But to get from where they were to where they wanted to be …

CG: What date are we talking about?

LC: We're talking about '88, '89. But all the time there were people actually making links – to Nelson Mandela in prison. I wasn't part of that. The first time I met Madiba was in 1990 when he came out of prison, and I met him in Luthuli House in SA as soon as he came out. He's my hero, there are photographs of him and me all over my house, I actually adored the man. He was … they needed his active leadership and that was the thing that I believe some of the National Party came to understand. But it was constant pressure on them in private, and of course it had to go through the hands of … I had to stand up for government policy, but I also had to work a second channel.

CG: Do you think in the 1990s the British government was doing … what was the nature of the pressure they were putting on then? Anti-Apartheid felt they weren't doing enough to make de Klerk address the violence and to negotiate.

LC: You were trying to change the habits of 20 years in the police force. You had a very uncertain white majority as to even the relief when the ANC was unbanned. I remember this all very clearly because on the 2nd February 1990 I was in Lusaka at a meeting when we got the news. And we partied all night, I have to say, it was a great night, because everybody I was working with in Southern Africa believed this would be right, but they couldn't believe it had happened. I think then when Roelf Meyer and Cyril [Ramaphosa} started to work together on the constitution, we gave a great deal of private support to what was happening. But the one thing that had to happen was that they needed to work out their own way of sorting out all the things that were wrong, the discrimination, and that took a long while to do after all those years. I mean it goes way back before Steve Biko was killed. I met Mandela in the early years too, so I know quite a lot of the human sacrifice that many black people in South Africa, and Coloured people too, and many whites, I mean Black Sash were an incredible organisation. I often wonder whether we knew enough about Black Sash in this country. I tried to make their efforts known, but I'm not sure I always succeeded.

CG: Could you say something about the impact … did the Anti-Apartheid Movement's stream of letters and delegations right from 1986 … what effect did that have? What recollections do you have?

LC: Well, I knew they wouldn't give up, and nor they should they have given up. I had quite a lot of sympathy … I never had sympathy with violence. I was very cross, because I love cricket, when Peter Hain dug up the cricket pitch. But I remember saying to Peter some years afterwards, 'Did you really have to dig up a cricket pitch?'. And he said, 'Yes', he said 'I had to get inside the psyche'. It had a remarkable impact, but at the time I thought it was a very bad thing to do.

CG: In the '80s, in our archive there are a large number of letters to and from members from the government, especially you, on all kinds of issues, like the Isle of Man being used as a Freeport and on Optica aircraft. Did all those things have an effect?

LC: They came across my desk. Some of them were routine policy, and I think whatever my own doubts and my determination to get change, I had to work to get change in South Africa. It was no good working on the British government except when we got a chink of light and you could say, 'Look, somebody wants to talk about this'. And I have to say I have a great deal of praise for the diplomatic service and their colleagues, who worked so hard behind the scenes. I don't think that was something that people in the AAM could really ever understand. It's wrong to think that diplomats, however much they much protest this, are only the voice of ministers. Of course they are to a large extent, but other things had to be done, and they did them. I don't know if you've talked to Robin Renwick or Tony [Reeve], who were the key people during those times, but given that I could never have met the range of people whom I met in South Africa from '86 through to '94 without help from the ambassadors, as they were in those days before they came back into the Commonwealth. I was one of many who was quietly working away behind the scenes, and that's what has to be done when you have an absolute wall.

CG: Let me come back to the desired outcomes. Anti-Apartheid always felt that, certainly in the '80s, Britain wasn't prepared, feared, an ANC government and was looking for some sort of accommodation, and that was why Buthelezi was welcomed …

LC: Well, Buthelezi was an interesting conduit in a sense, because you could get the sense of his opposition to apartheid, but his fear that, if you like, the hardest people in the ANC and the hardest people in what we now call the Freedom Front, would never let the middle settle. And he used to say, 'Well, how do you get them?' I still see him now and again, elderly as he is, he still remembers some of the things we did to try and bring people together. I think that is the most interesting relationship that I had with him. But much of this will not have been documented by anybody else, because I didn't write it down.

CG: One thing that Anti-Apartheid pressed on that did have some result was on political prisoners and some of the people who were sentenced to death. Can you say something about that?

LC: Well, we couldn't intervene, per se, but we could also make sure that they had help in their political cases. So I can't say much about it simply because I don't have any notes about it, but I can tell you that there were several arguments, I remember a big argument with Pik [Botha] on one occasion, I remember saying 'You cannot go down this path'.

CG: There was the Sharpeville Six case …

LC: But whenever you discussed these issues, the white South Africans were thoroughly defensive and expected anybody outside who just happened to have a white skin to agree with them, and I just told them that I didn't. And that was when various legal friends started to push very hard, amongst the legal profession in South Africa.

CG: You did make representations on the Sharpeville Six, but not on many other cases of people who were hanged …

LC: Well, politically we were in a very … one had an enormous amount of pressure to not just make decisions, but to balance those decisions and the time available. We did make a lot of representations and certainly the ambassadors did them on practically all cases, but you had to have a logical way of getting the ruling National Party to accept that there could have been a miscarriage of justice. It was a difficult time, to put in mildly.

CG: Can we move on and talk about the frontline states. Was that covered in your remit?

LC: It did indeed, it came under my Africa remit and my overseas development remit.

CG: Did the government take into account the South African aggression as a reason why countries like Mozambique and Botswana and Angola should be given …

LC: Not as a reason to be given development assistance per se, but they had a lot of refugees. I can remember as clearly as yesterday going with Dr Chiepe, who at that time was the Foreign Minister of Botswana, and we went to see the burnt-out bungalows that the SADF had bombed in southern Botswana, outside Gaberone, and I said to her 'What has happened to the people who lived here?' And she said, 'Well, at the moment they're all with relatives'. But we gave some help to the Botswanan government to help them. In Mozambique … Mozambique was beginning to deal with something slightly different. I got very involved in trying to see there was a peace settlement between FRELIMO and RENAMO at the same time as, obviously, certain characters in South Africa were backing RENAMO. We had a very difficult job to do there. We did it. I remember when the late Maeve Fort was ambassador in Mozambique … I did a lot of things with her, but what I couldn't do directly, she just went off and did. She was an incredibly active lady. I worked with Jorge Rebelo and many others. And that is why today certain of the older generation in Mozambique look back on what we did between '90 and '92. But we were doing that to try to bring peace between FRELIMO and RENAMO. I went off to see Dhlakama as well, and he said, 'You've got friends in South Africa', and I said, 'Yes, I've got a lot of black friends in South Africa'. I remember that conversation. They couldn't understand – I don't know if you've talked to Michael Young – they couldn't understand how, because of my background, I could work in this way, but I learned to do it and I'm glad I did, is all I can say. I got into trouble quite a lot of the time.

CG: Can you say a bit more about that …

LC: Well, in the House of Commons I was under enormous pressure from certain Conservative backbenchers who'd never set foot in Africa …

CG: John Carlisle …

LC: [*Laughs*] John Carlisle was a case in point, but he was not the only one. But the critical thing was that you held the line and you got on with the job and the job was not just answering the AAM's letters, the job was very much on the ground in the countries, particularly in the frontline states. I can remember one discussion with Sam Nujoma, when they got their independence. I presented the mace to the Parliament of Namibia and to Sam. This was about eight weeks after the independence celebrations because the mace wasn't ready for Parliament, so I had to make a separate journey down, which was great. I was with [Hage] Geingob in February and I know them all and they've known me for the best part of 20 or 30 years, because I went and I listened, and I would give them advice on occasions, which sometimes they took and sometimes they didn't.

CG: You must have met Trevor Huddleston …

LC: Yes, I went to see him too when he was in the nursing home before he died. He was a fiery character, immense compassion, didn't always understand the realities of politics and finance, but we argued, we didn't always agree, as you can imagine. But we did

actually have a dialogue. Same with Desmond Tutu, who used to get very cross with me. He said 'You're really very nice in private' – I always remember that.

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

LC: I'm not giving you facts and figures because I can't, in the sense that … I don't know who else you have talked to. When Bob [Hughes] suggested that I should talk to you, I said I'd do my best. As Bob knew, I had a remarkable relationship with some of the people in the AAM, the late Mike Terry … Mike Terry used to shout at me in public and talk to me quietly when we were in the office. For Mike it was never going to be enough that I would be trying to bring people together.

CG: When was this? When did that dialogue start? Was it after Mandela's release?

LC: No, it was before that. The first time I met him, I think, was '88, '89. It was around the time that I was getting to know certain people in de Klerk's government. You see, de Klerk was not an immovable person and that was the mistake that I kept trying to explain to people, that de Klerk was actually listening. In all we've done together since – I sit on his Global Leadership Foundation now – we often think back to those days. How do you get somebody who is in power to listen to their most fiery opponents? It was hard. Mike didn't understand that all the time. He did, I think, by the end, I mean before his death – that was really untimely and tragic. Before Mike's death, I can remember a number of people saying to me, 'How did you manage to talk to all these characters?' and I said, 'Well I just asked'. They didn't refuse, and that was good.

CG: I think the issue, always, for Anti-Apartheid was not that everybody, including Margaret Thatcher and the British and de Klerk, accepted that apartheid was unsustainable and had to go. It was really what was going to be put in its place. Was it going to be a truly democratic South Africa and what sort of constitution would there be?

LC: Democracy takes time to build … with Cyril and Roelf Meyer working together on it, it wasn't perfect … they know it wasn't perfect …

CG: All those on-off negotiations …

LC: It's a question of edging forward, as someone once described it to me, it's like getting a potential suicide person off a narrow ledge, you don't do it in a sudden movement, you do it literally centimetre by centimetre. And it's true that that isn't very satisfactory to a protest movement. One thing you don't know about me is that I was Chairman of Greater London Young Conservatives in a period in '69 when we were having fiery debates with the Party and my first husband, Eric Chalker, wrote a pamphlet, actually with my second husband, Clive Lander, called 'Set the Party Free', and all of my friends. And I had to manage that. I remember going to see the late Iain Macleod, who was our President, and saying 'We want you to write a forward to this'. He looked at me and said, 'Well, I don't always agree with you lot, you're firebrands'. He said 'We must listen to you though'. In the foreword to this he wrote, 'Whilst we

may not agree with what they do and how they do it, we dare not fail to listen'. And that was the sort of motto that was with me when Iain died in 1970. I worked with him on research on Africa through the '60s, so I knew him well. That is the other thing, when I sat down and talked to people like KK [Kenneth Kaunda], who I still see every time I go to Lusaka, though he is getting very frail. I think the answer is we had the network of contacts, we kept trying to see how we change things, little by little. And this is what infuriated Mike and Bob and everybody else, absolutely infuriated them. They wanted to have total change. But I said, 'You won't get it by total change'. I think it's easier to do in a democracy, which has had years of argument. The trouble was there was argument, but they weren't listening to one another. And the ANC, until Madiba was released, the ANC weren't listening to the National Party, and the National Party weren't listening to the ANC, and trying to make that happen was actually quite hard work. I think I had a little part in that.

CG: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

LC: It's not factual, I'm well aware of that. But I'm also well aware that trotting off as I did to see people and getting to know quite a lot of members of the ANC, some sadly no longer with us, was the right way for me to proceed, even if others wanted to take a much harsher line.

CG: I have one last question. It's interesting that a lot of this happened with Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister. You obviously feel that there was space – it wasn't always obvious outside …

LC: It wasn't always obvious inside either.

CG: Did Geoffrey Howe … what was Geoffrey Howe's attittude?

LC: Geoffrey Howe was extremely helpful. He took the same attitude as Iain Macleod had done, ten years before. There was a generational change. Something else you won't know about my past. I went to university in Germany for a while, this was under the auspices of what we called Building Bridges, which was to get young Germans to talk to young Brits in order to bury …

CG: Was this in the '60s?

LC: Yes, the early '60s. I was in Berlin when the wall was built, so … that was '61. I had in that experience to learn to listen to a lot of things I didn't like and eventually I made some wonderful German friends – what their fathers and their uncles and their grandfathers did I dread to think. But at least they understood the need to build peace and I think it was some of that experience that probably shaped the way I did things in Africa and still does today.

CG: Thank you.