

NELSON AND WINNIE AWARDED FREEDOM OF ABERDEEN

On Feb 20th 1984 the District Council of the City of Aberdeen in North East Scotland voted massively to award the city's most prestigious honour, Freedom of the City, jointly to Nelson Mandela and Winnie Mandela.

This notable achievement was the result of several months of often furious debate which culminated in a rout of the groups opposed to the award and victory for open-mindedness and liberal thinkers throughout the area.

The idea to make this award was first moved by a local councillor on the controlling Labour group in Nov. 1983 who based his argument not only on the Mandela's great contribution to the freedom struggle in South Africa but also on Aberdeen's long association with anti-apartheid work and hoped the award to both would bring the possibility that Winnie Mandela would be allowed to come in person to accept the honour, since she is not in gaol and theoretically the South African authorities could not prevent her.

This move was obviously welcomed by the Aberdeen Anti-Apartheid group. Aberdeen has had a active movement for a long time but since 1981 many of the activists were involved in other issues. In September 1983 the group was rejuvenated and through the medium of a public meeting more than 60 members were recruited.

Therefore it was a very useful coincidence that an active aware group was present when the Mandela issue arose, for unfortunately the initial move by the Councillor was made without consultation or agreement with other interested groups in the city or even the rest of the District Council!

This meant that the suggestion came onto the public forum 'out of the blue' with no previous discussion and was instantly singled out for virulent attack by the local press and Conservative supporters on the Council.

Their argument was hardly original or thought out, it consisted of saying that nobody know who the Mandela's were, this was not a relevant issue to local people and such a prestigious award would be demeaned by giving it to someone who did not have the unanimous support of the whole Council and City.

These views were given a lot of space in the 'Evening Express' a Thompson owned paper with a circulation of over 70,000 in the area and they quoted the leader of the Conservative group saying that Mandela was a 'socialist rabble rouser and a terrorist!

This was the time (Dec. 1983) of year when Aberdeen A/A started putting an active campaign together to raise the issue to its proper level and show that there was widespread support for such an award.

The methods used were both old and new. A petition was circulated throughout the city and notably within the University, mass leaflets of the city centre were organised and a public meeting with speeches from the ANC and Bob Hughes(MP for Aberdeen North and Chairman of Anti-Apartheid.)

Postcards with a printed message of support and picture of Mandela were distributed which were addressed to the City Chambers. Individuals filled out the name of their respective councillor and despatched them. This meant there was a steady trickle of these reaching the local authority over an eight week period.

The other major plan of the campaign was to directly lobby councillors of all political persuasion. We made a 'presentation pack' containing details of the Mandela's work, copies of the National petition, the Freedom Charter and local material which were used to back up our arguments. A Formal Presentation and talk was given to the Labour group who throughout the campaign gave continued solid support and informal (lunchtime and evening socials) talks with the Liberal Group. The Conservative group leader did not reply to our letters asking for a meeting.

The Council had agreed that a two thirds majority of the council members needed to be in favour of the proposal and through the Labour group has an overall majority only with the support of the Liberals would the motion be carried.

Therefore a lot of our efforts were channelled into persuading this Group and to their credit they agreed with us that in a free vote of the Council they would vote in favour and their only reservation was the initial handling of the issue and timing. It must be remembered that local elections are to be held in May of this year in Scotland!

We also organised a large number of letters of support to the press and obtained a 'right to reply' in the form of an open letter to the accusations and misinformed comment that had been published to date.

In the New Year the 'Evening Express' had done a 'survey' which they claimed showed that a majority of Aberdeen's population did not want the award to go to the Mandela's because not enough people knew who they were!!

Many letters poured in protesting at the bias of the 'survey' and made the point that the fact that not many people knew what Nelson and Winnie Mandela have done in no way retracts from the fact that they have spent their whole lives opposing apartheid and as two of the greatest living symbols of that struggle are more than worthy of any City's highest honour.

Several schools, Churches and individual letters and articles were published and by the middle of February the campaign had taken the initiative away from the press even though they continued to try to highlight the 'unsuitability' of the Mandela's for the award.

The whole thing culminated in the very well attended public meeting on 17th February and in the Council meeting on the following Monday, following a public presentation of the local petition, the Labour group pushed for a vote which was carried by 30 votes to 13, the necessary two-thirds majority.

Nearly all the Liberals voted with the Labour councillors and also one Conservative. The motion was opposed by all the rest of the Conservatives and one Liberal.

Our thanks have been sent to all the Councillors who stood firm throughout the time when the press were attacking the move and since, when organisations such as the local Chamber of Commerce were critical.

The real campaign starts now since there will be an award ceremony when a major representative of the ANC or A/A will be invited to receive the honour on behalf of the Mandelas and will act as a focal point to further highlight the injustices in present-day South Africa, and lend yet more substance to campaigning in North East Scotland.

The campaigning in Aberdeen showed that there is very widespread support for such issues and that many people are concerned with what is happening a long way from their own area.

Finally, representatives of all A/A groups are very welcome in Aberdeen when the award ceremony and combined rally take place. The actual data has not been finalised but will be published as soon as possible.

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