Interview with Lord [Robert] Hughes by Håkan Thörn, 24 October 2000, reproduced on the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee Forward to Freedom project website http://www.aamarchives.org/

HT: When and where were you born?

RH: I was born in a small village on the east coast of Scotland called Pittenweem. I spent most of my life in Aberdeen.

HT: What organisations associated with the struggle against apartheid did you participate in and what were the commissions of trust that you had?

RH: I was a member of an organisation called the Movement for Colonial Freedom – it still exists, it's called Liberation now. When I became a Member of Parliament in 1970 I was the joint chairman of Liberation. Then in 1975 I became the Vice-Chair of the Anti-Apartheid Movement and I became Chair a year later. I remained Chair until 1994 when the Movement disbanded.

HT: When did you start being active in the Movement for Colonial Freedom?

RH: That was in the 1950s. But I should say that from 1947 to 1954 I lived in South Africa. I had gone out immediately after the Second World War with my parents to Benoni in what was then the Eastern Transvaal and went to school there. I started my engineering apprenticeship in Pietermaritzburg in Natal, actually in Howick, which was 15 or 16 miles from Pietermaritzburg, and I came back to the UK in 1954 and I didn't go back to South Africa until it was permissible to do so. But I became active in the MCF about 1956.

HT: Did you travel to Southern Africa?

RH: Well, I travelled to Angola and Mozambique, after they had achieved their independence from Portugal. I was in Angola for independence. Then I've been to Zambia and Kenya, briefly, and to Zimbabwe after Zimbabwe became independent.

HT: Did you travel as an activist?

RH: We had an organisation which was engaged in Southern Africa and so I went – I once did a grand tour of Angola and Mozambique, Zambia and Tanzania. I went in connection with ICSA – an organisation that was trying to bring anti-apartheid movements in different countries together.

HT: So it was as an AAM representative that you went?

RH: Yes.

HT: What would you say was important in terms of experience in getting involved in the struggle?

RH: I became a convinced socialist and very much against colonialism. It's hard to remember at that period of time how few African countries were free. The whole of Central Africa was a colony.

There was a huge growth of feeling that people should have their independence, so it grew out of that.

HT: How would you characterise the relationship between Labour and the Anti-Apartheid Movement? There was huge disappointment in the 1960s – Labour got into power and didn't fulfil their promises …

RH: That's not entirely true. The Labour Government between 1964 and 1970 did introduce an arms embargo against South Africa. In the '60s, if one is fair retrospectively, South Africa was not a big issue in British politics, it wasn't a big issue in world politics. You have to judge what happened in the '60s in the context of the climate of the day.

HT: Was the relationship between Labour and the AAM the same all along or did it change?

RH: The relationship with the Labour Party was always good. But it took some time to get the issue of South Africa – and Namibia and Zimbabwe – high up the agenda of the average member of the Labour Party. There is a kind of mythology grown up that there were always millions of people in the world who were against apartheid. It isn't true. If we had had as many members as people who claimed to have been members of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, the South African government would have been brought down 20 years before, so there's a kind of nostalgia. People remember the later days when the Anti-Apartheid Movement had huge influence, could turn out hundreds of thousands of people on the streets for a demonstration. But that wasn't so in the '60s, it wasn't true in the '70s. It was only during the late '70s and the '80s that it became an issue even at the UN.

HT: When was the turning point, would you say?

RH: It's hard to be precise. There was no sudden day when you could say we'd cracked it. A lot of hard work was done in the AAM office by Mike Terry and the staff. A comparatively small number of members of parliament put in a lot of work. A comparatively small number of trade unionists put in a lot of work. And it began to take off. People began to understand what the issues were. But it was very very hard work. It was easy in the last couple of years but before that it was very hard work.

HT: How would you characterise relations between the AAM and the trade unions?

RH: They were very good – again the Anti-Apartheid Movement had a trade union committee of which one of the leading lights was Fred Carneson, who died four or five years ago. We engaged trade union leaders, and much more importantly we engaged the branches of the trade unions. Some of the trade union leaders were very helpful, but it was because a lot of work was done at grassroots level that the trade unions came on board. They wouldn't go too far – because it's not the way of the British trade union movement – to take direct action. Although the Shop Distributive and Allied Workers [USDAW] were very good, but there were no strikes, refusing to let ships sail or things like that, but they provided us with a lot of very useful information on what was happening.

HT: Were there any tensions between any of the unions? In Sweden in the '80s the equivalent of the AAM was ISAK and they had conflicts with the Metal Union because it wouldn't support withdrawal of Swedish industry. There was quite a hard debate on that. They didn't even want to divest.

RH: There were tensions in that respect. A lot of the unions did divest their pension funds from South Africa. Bt if it came down to saying to a company 'You've got this contract with South Africa, we won't work on it' – they wouldn't do that. In the 1960s, for example, one of the shipyards in Aberdeen – a small shipyard, but it was important in terms of employment – and they had orders for six trawlers for a South African company. I had managed to get a motion through the Aberdeen Town Council, because I was a Councillor at that time, that we wouldn't buy any South African goods. The South Africans threatened to withdraw the contract unless this motion was abandoned by the Town Council. The press went down and saw the shipyard workers and they said 'We're building the ships – it's our livelihood'. And I went down and spoke to them and they said 'OK, we understand what you're doing politically, but it's our livelihood'. The Conservative Government had decided that if trade unions wanted to have a political fund, they had to have a special resolution to do so. I was a member of the Engineering Union. I went down to a factory in Hatfield which made aero parts and I spoke very much in favour of having a political fund. The Chairman of the meeting said 'It's very important that we have a political fund, because there's some silly bugger in Parliament trying to stop us selling aeroplane parts to South Africa'. It was me! So of course these tensions were there. And there were certainly tensions with the Labour Government between 1974 and 1979 – partly because of Rhodesia. The economy of Britain at that time was such that South Africa was an important customer. The policy of divesting and not buying South African goods was not an easy policy to win, even on the Left. Initially some of the Trotskyist groups argued that you could only get change in South Africa if you built up an industrial society, so they were in favour of investment in order to bring about change. The idea that there was a uniform belief from the beginning that the boycott of South African goods should become a campaign for disinvestment isn't true – these were long-drawn out battles and very fierce arguments. That isn't to the detriment of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. I think it shows how strong we had to be to get to where we got to.

HT: What was the influence of the '68 student movement on the Anti-Apartheid Movement?

RH: I only became involved on a day-to-day basis with the Anti-Apartheid Movement in 1975. I'm certain that the student movement was very influential right throughout the period.

HT: It did bring some militancy – the Stop the Seventy Tour. In Sweden there has been tension between new social movements doing civil disobedience and extra-parliamentary action and the unions, who are sceptical about extra-parliamentary action.

RH: We had that same tension here. In the Anti-Apartheid Movement the Executive and the officers started policy discussions going. We took a conscious decision, which I think was right, that we would go for the biggest broadest based Movement we could get. I didn't ask any questions of people who were members of the Anti-Apartheid Movement about what their religion was or what their politics were – didn't care if they were Communists or Tories or Liberals or whatever. If they were prepared to work with the Anti-Apartheid Movement, then they were our

allies. We involved the churches – and not just the Christian churches. We reached out and tried to get the non-Christian churches involved. We wanted the biggest spread of trade unions involved. We tried to build a broad political spectrum. The truth is that the majority of people who were in the Anti-Apartheid Movement were in the Labour Party. A large number were in the Communist Party. A goodly number were in the Liberal Party, and very few were in the Conservative Party. We set out to engage the broadest possible political spectrum at a time when it was not respectable to be interested in what was happening outside the United Kingdom. What happened 6,000 miles away – nothing to do with us. There were parallel battles going on about the withdrawal of Britain from East of Suez. We wanted to engage the average British member of the public. And so as the Anti-Apartheid Movement we set ourselves against direct action. We never tried to stop it. We never said they couldn't do it, just that the Anti-Apartheid Movement couldn't do it. The Anti-Apartheid Movement was almost destroyed because the people who believed in direct action wouldn't accept that. They insisted it had to be done their way.

H*T: Was that decision taken at an Annual General Meeting?*

RH: It was never said that the Anti-Apartheid Movement would never be involved in direct action. But we took a conscious decision that it would be a broad-based movement.

HT: When was that?

RH: I think it was there from the beginning.

HT: Even in the '60s and '70s …

RH: I think it was there at the beginning. Then it sharpened when we had to take a decision about what to do when people started putting resolutions at the annual conference demanding direct action on this, that and the other. Then we had to decide to accept that or reject it. We had to change the constitution. The Anti-Apartheid Movement was conceived as an open body. You could join on the day of the AAM and you could vote – that day. And then we had 300 people turn up one morning and supporting one point of view. It became a battleground. The fight wasn't about South Africa any more, the fight was an internal ideological battle between those people who believed in Trotskyism and those people who believed in Communism. They tried to fight that battle within the Anti-Apartheid Movement. Our job was to get the maximum possible support for governments to take action against the South African government and to give the maximum possible support to the African National Congress – and for the Pan Africanist Congress. It was up to the people of South Africa to decide who they wanted to govern them – not us. So we worked with every political movement, as we did in Zimbabwe. I think that if the Anti-Apartheid Movement had lost the argument over direct action then the Movement would have been destroyed.

HT: If we talk about relations between the Anti-Apartheid Movement and the state – Labour or Conservative – to compare with Sweden and the Social Democratic government, who were very much involved in supporting the ANC – there was a very close relationship between the Swedish anti-apartheid movement and the government. They were actually partly funded by government

money. But as far as I know the AAM never had any money from the government, and didn't ask for it.

RH: No, we never received state funding. We didn't actually want state funding because we wanted to be able to criticise whichever government was in power. As it happened it was mostly Conservative governments. We never sought a subsidy from any foreign governments, so we were independent. Our relationship improved after a while, in that government ministers were prepared to see us and listen to what we had to say. I have to say that they didn't often take our advice.

HT: Did that start to happen in the '80s?

RH: Yes, in the '80s. We saw Ministers during the Labour Government, but again they were sympathetic, but we had a very big criticism of the Labour Government because it wouldn't act strongly enough on Southern Rhodesia.

HT: This strategy of seeking a broad base – today it's called rainbow politics.

RH: Is it not called communitarian now? I think one of the disappointing things was that we didn't really engage in the struggle the indigenous black population. We tried hard, we had a Black and Ethnic Minorities Committee – which I didn't like in the sense that I thought we should all work together. I was a bit afraid that it would become polarised. We were an anti-apartheid movement – we wanted black and white to stand together and fight together. But I was persuaded that if we were to get the maximum participation of the black population of Britain, then it was necessary for people who knew how to engage them to do it. I remember one critic of the AAM telling me that whities should have nothing to do with the struggle in South Africa. I told them they didn't know history – the situation was caused by whites, so I didn't see why we shouldn't try to remedy it.

HT: So why was it that AAM wasn't so successful in involving black people?

RH: I don't know. The truth I suppose is that the proportion of the white population who were active was much the same as the proportion of the black population – but I thought we ought to have been able to do better.

HT: In Britain blacks got involved in politics much later than in the States.

RH: The same struggle for black representation was taking place at the same time in the Labour Party. The argument there was that they wanted black-only branches in the Labour Party. They set up Black Sections but you won't find a black branch of the Labour Party. But the idea that a black caucus was necessary to get black members of the Labour Party didn't stand up.

HT: What about relations with the ANC? Was the strategy of seeking a broad base formed in discussion with the ANC?

RH: We worked very closely with the ANC. Under the Anti-Apartheid Movement constitution the liberation movements were entitled to have representation on our National Committee. The ANC

regularly sent representatives – the PAC occasionally but not very often. So we were closer to the ANC. There were some segments of the PAC who were very hostile to the Anti-Apartheid Movement because they said we were a child of the ANC.

HT: Well, weren't you?

RH: We weren't a child of the ANC. The ANC once came to us and asked if the AAM would give them the title of the sole liberation movement in South Africa. It was done in Namibia, of course, where SWAPO was recognised by the UN. But we said no – there are other liberation movements, not just the PAC, there are others. We thought if we narrowed ourselves down in South Africa, then we would narrow ourselves down in the UK. But we had very close working relations with the ANC and certainly we were closer to the ANC than we were to any other organisation.

HT: How would you characterise the importance of the media and information in the struggle against apartheid?

RH: We used to publish a lot of material ourselves. And in truth – first of all we didn't have all the advantages of modern computers. Looking at the material we produced near the end of the life of the Anti-Apartheid Movement, a lot of the material we produced earlier on was pretty amateurish stuff. But it was good for its day. We always complained we didn't get enough coverage in the British press. The press likes trouble – it doesn't like reporting that 100,000 people or 200,000 people – or once half a million people we got out in London – on a march and demonstration. But it went well, people were good-natured, we had splendid speakers from all over the world, people don't like to report that. Some television reporters were very good. Indeed we made a television programme ourselves. But the media was important and as things built up, they would report that we had seen government ministers. It was hard work but enjoyable – because we were comrades working together for the same cause.

HT: It seems that the '70s were a hard time for the AAM. If you look at the '60s you have some well-established journalists helping out with AA News. And then in the '80s if you look at the press cuttings – at least in the late '80s there is always a statement from the AAM if there is something about South Africa.

RH: It's hard to pin down when that happened, but it became the norm that if something happened in South Africa that the press turned to the Anti-Apartheid Movement for a comment. It is very hard to measure the impact of the boycott campaign and the very limited sanctions – it's hard to measure how effective they were. On Rhodesia there was undoubtedly a conspiracy between the Americans, the South Africans and the British to pretend that change was going to take place in Southern Africa. That if you invested you would get the emergence of a black middle class and that change would take place that way. There was an organised conspiracy and they would not admit that investment was really being used to exploit black workers. All the evidence showed that British companies paid lower wages in South Africa than we would pay elsewhere. The Americans and the British for economic reasons were only too happy to see the South Africans have extremely restricted trade union laws and so on because it was good for business.

HT: Is it fair to say that the work of the AAM to a large extent depended on what happened inside South Africa?

RH: Yes, I think that was true. We used to say that the best propagandist ally we had was the South African Government itself. Mostly in tragic circumstances like Sharpeville and Soweto. There were the hangings. It wasn't the Anti-Apartheid Movement in Britain or the world that brought about the end of apartheid. It was the South African people themselves. It was their resistance that eventually broke the system. I suppose the final nail was the American banks' refusal to lend any more money. One of the two major events in this country – the first Mandela concert – was an astonishing success. It broadcast for eight and a half hours in this country and was shown in the United States. That was because of someone sympathetic in the BBC – that was a big boost and it reached out beyond the Wembley stadium.

HT: But it means that you were not only dependent on what happened in South Africa but on what the established media actually reported.

RH: Every political movement – its success of failure is dependent on what sort of coverage it gets in the media. It was a cause – the greatest cause – this century. I suppose you could argue that the movement for the independence of India was greater. I don't think worldwide there had been a more important campaign, going back to the campaign to end slavery.

HT: What made it difficult for the AAM in the '70s was that you had Sharpeville in the '60s. But when I go through the press cuttings there is nothing up to Soweto, apart from the '70s tour. Then in the '80s came the insurrection …

RH: Part of the work in the Anti-Apartheid Movement was in alerting the media to what was happening – they began to report what was happening. It was because of the growing awareness that it became an issue. In Parliament we raised foreign affairs debates – it was a steady process of making South Africa an issue. The one thing we got entirely wrong was that we thought Namibia wouldn't become independent until we got rid of the apartheid regime, but Namibia got its independence first.

HT: So I have a final question – can you define from your own point of view the concept of solidarity?

RH: I think solidarity is sharing aims with people you have never met, never known, and being prepared to work with them to achieve their aims. To stand by them even in times of unpopularity. We had some difficulty with the armed struggle. Britain is not a pacifist country, but it doesn't believe in armed rebellion. That dates from its colonial past. We supported the armed struggle. We said that was the choice of the people of South Africa. So solidarity means you work with people you support and you help them in every way you can. And hopefully in the end you achieve a common objective. In our case that was to achieve the end of the huge indignity of the apartheid regime. And the great thing about it all was that we won.