

Interview with David Steel by Hana Sandhu, 29 October 2013 for the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee project Forward to Freedom
<http://www.aamarchives.org/>

Hana Sandhu (Interviewer): alright recording now. Okay. The date is the 29th October 2013, my name is Hana Sandhu and I'm interviewing Lord David Steel for the Forward to Freedom Anti-Apartheid Movement History Project. Please state your full name.

David Steel (Interviewee): David Steel

HS: when and where were you born?

DS: I was born in Kirkcaldy in 31st March 1938 but I have no connection with Kirkcaldy, my parents left there when I was 2.

HS: What do you do - or did - for a living?

DS: I was an MP most of my life. I was the baby of the house so I came into politics very young at 26.

HS: Have you been involved in any other political or campaigning activities apart from anti-apartheid?

DS: oh lots, umm Shelter and currently lots of all-party groups, umm the Scottish constitutional convention I chaired which led to the Scottish Parliament and currently I'm president of the all-party parliamentary group on Africa.

HS: When and how did you first become aware of the situation in Southern Africa?

DS: well I was partly brought up in Kenya so - I was there as a schoolboy from the age of 11 to 15 and when I came back to school and then to university umm my entry to university within about a year coincided with the Sharpeville massacre and the founding of the Anti-Apartheid Movement and as I had already an African background, if you like, I was immediately umm signed up as a student member of the Anti-Apartheid Movement right away at the very beginning and I still treasure a photograph of me holding up a placard at Edinburg University calling for a boycott on South Africa goods in the Refreshment department.

HS: umm...Why did you feel you should do something about it?

DS: Sorry?

HS: Why did you felt you should do something about the situation?

DS: well again because I had lived in Africa and umm it was partly my own experience because people don't realise that in colonial Africa, well certainly in Kenya, I can't speak for the other colonies umm education was actually based on racial grounds so you had errr European schools, Asian schools, and African schools and there were no multi-racial schools in Kenya until a few years before independence which is astonishing because we condemned apartheid but we actually practiced it in our own territories so it was against that background that I thought the system was wrong umm even at quite a young age.

HS: umm...Were you on a committee or part of a local group in your time of campaigning?

DS: Well I was... I think there must have been a branch at Edinburgh University, I was a student member of the movement and I think we must have had student branch but I think we were mainly involved in meetings and umm as I say a demonstration that I remember because I've seen the photograph but it was a cross party I was involved in the Liberal club but there were people in the Labour club but also the Conservative club who were involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

HS: ummm you were the president of the AAM from '67 to 1970? Was that correct?

DS: '66 to '70 yes.

HS: '66 ummm can you describe...

DS; well when I became an MP in [ummm] I came in about in a by-election in March '65 and I quite quickly became a member of the National Committee of the Anti-Apartheid Movement which was open to all I think it met total of 4 times a year there [bells ringing] the National Committee was the big body the executive was the working body I wasn't on that but the National Committee included people like Neil Kinnock who I knew before he came to Parliament, but I was already in Parliament at that time ummm and then what happened in 1966 [err] I'd only been on National Committee for a year or so but a group led by Abdul Minty, who was then the secretary, came to see me in the central lobby and asked me to be president and the reason they gave was very interesting one because I was a bit surprised I thought you know a young MP umm the previous presidents had been Barbara Castle was the first one and David Ennals was the second one, and Barbara Castle had to resign when she went into Harold Wilson's cabinet and the same happened with David Ennals so these three ummm said to me we're looking for somebody who's not likely to be going into the Cabinet so a backhanded compliment and I laughed and I said well that's me obviously and I said yes and I thoroughly enjoyed my four years and I only gave it up because after the 1970 election the Liberals did very badly in that election and we were down to 6 members and I had to become the Chief Whip and spend all my time to revive - help revive the Liberal Party which was in a very bad state so I gave up all the other things I was doing at that moment.

HS: yeah...So your role as president can you sorta describe umm describe your role – what you did?

DS: well the role was – I chaired the National Committee umm the [errr] the executive was doing all the hard work the National Committee was like the broad parliament of the committee if you like and I had to chair that and I led deputations to ministers and demonstrations outside South Africa House and the MOD, and that sort of thing and did a lot of rallies and we had – we were very lucky because we had people like Oliver Tambo and [Cyril Ramaphosa](#) speaking at meetings [Sam Njoma](#) from Namibia so it was a very active time. We had huge meetings in places like Central Hall which I was involved in...

HS: umm - Can you describe the general dynamic of the Committee, it does sound very dynamic with Oliver Tambo - I mean the dynamics of the Anti-Apartheid Movement?

DS: well Oliver Tambo was in exile here in London at the time and I got to know him quite well and one of my great regrets was is that I turned down the invitation to his daughter's wedding because he and Adelaide invited me, but at that point I had a very sort of strict rule that I didn't do things in London on the weekend, because I had a big constituency in Scotland to look after and I just thought it's impossible to divide loyalties so I was very strict I don't do anything there London on the weekends and that made life tolerable. But it meant I missed his daughter's wedding and it was very sad because it had been great occasion and it would have been a chance to get to know the two of them better but I also met Oliver Tambo memorably in Lusaka after I'd been president must have been probably 1971, I think, when umm I been put out of Rhodesia by Ian Smith's regime and I met with - at that stage we we're allowed to meet with the government would not meet with the ANC ministers would not meet with the ANC, civil servants could meet with them but not ministers I wasn't a minister and the chief civil servant out there in Lusaka was of course the High Commissioner for Zambia who hosted meeting with Oliver Tambo and me in his drawing room it was extraordinary and we were discussing you know ways in which we could somehow bridge this gap and get the ANC more recognised and that was the main thing of the meeting, and he had with him a umm guy, who was his helper who also contributed to the conversation and after he left I asked the High Commissioner who was that? And he said 'Oh I think we may hear more of him in the future very bright, up and coming ANC member' and it was Thabo Mbeki and that was how I first met Thabo and he and I became friends and there's a photograph up there...

HS: Oh yeah

DS: long before he was president and I got to know him very well and we did lots of campaigning together. But that was the Oliver Tambo connection sorry if I've wondered off...

HS: no no that's really interesting. What did you think of Oliver Tambo?

DS: I thought he was a remarkable leader people forget that he was the president of the ANC and Nelson Mandela to do him justice was always paying tribute to him and of course the airport in Johannesburg is still named after him Oliver Tambo International Airport which was great and I was there recently and very proud that it was called the Oliver Tambo Airport

HS: because obviously he spent a lot of time here in exile campaigning umm where were we - within the AAM, what specific campaigns were you most involved in?

DS: well the one that was the most dramatic for me was the Stop the '70 Tour because my constituency in the Borders is err a very rugby playing area one of the few parts of the country like South Wales which was where rugby is a local sport not just a thing for public school boys and they Springboks were going to have their Scottish match in my constituency which put tremendous err strain on me because I was president of the AAM; here were the Springboks and I dreaded them coming to my own constituency, so we decided to hold a public meeting the week before the match to explain to people why this match was wrong etc etc. I invited a very well known Scottish churchman George MacLeod to speak, Menzies Campbell who had just been an Olympic hero at the Olympic games, he wasn't an MP at that time, and we had this great public meeting and public meetings in the Borders were usually extremely well attended, election meetings would get several hundred people, it was very thinly attended which was an indication to me that we were not winning the argument

and then on the Saturday of the match we printed five thousand leaflets and we stood outside handing out leaflets explaining why we were not attending the match and why it was wrong and it was very very difficult because I saw lots of people who were my supporters going in to the match, and ummm the day was further complicated by the fact that there was a small activist group from Glasgow who came down and they were shouting insults at people and then they went marching around the town creating chaos and of course I was identified with them they had nothing to do with me but it was very unpopular in my constituency and following that election, that was in January the election took place in June and my majority fell to 550 after three recounts and I'd held the seat comfortably and it went way down I nearly lost it and the Conservative Party put out a last minute leaflet which was I thought quite brilliant they just had a rugby post with the ball going over it and the slogan underneath was 'Convert to Conservatism!' and it was a reminder on the eve of the polls about this thing that had happened 6 months before so that was the most difficult time I had in all my involvement in AAM the rest of the thing was not difficult at all I was enjoying the job but that was tough.

HS: yeah yeah - so in the run up to the Springbok arriving in your own constituency...

DS: exactly! I never imagined that would happen...

HS: yeah

DS: but they did

HS: so as you sort of knew this was about to happen I mean how long did you deliberate about what to do?

DS: well I wrote in my book I find the quotation in my book... [goes off to find his book] Yeah what I said was 'there was no more feeble argument than: "I disapprove of apartheid but.."' there can be no buts in the eyes of the majority of the people in South Africa or in the rest of the world sport has done nothing to alleviate apartheid merely to depress those struggling against it' so that was the argument that I was putting forward umm it was not well received to put it mildly.

HS: yeah umm but looking back on that event...

DS: but it didn't take long to decide that was the way to do it to have a proper meeting, protest outside the grounds peacefully and then unfortunately non-peaceful people arrived and sort of messed up the strategy.

HS: ummm can you describe what you think were the high points and low points of AA campaigning?

DS: well the high points were the huge meetings that we had in Central Hall which I've already described with people like Cyril Ramaphosa and Oliver Tambo umm I can remember that Hall takes thousands and it was very very exciting, battling against the Thatcher government who were being very - it wasn't even the Thatcher Government then - they were very difficult in dealing with not recognising the ANC not being willing later on to in the Thatcher era to impose sanctions which meant we arguing for, Trevor Huddleston who was not my immediate successor because Ambrose Reeves was, but he became the president and it was much more much better more effective president than I was because he had

spent so much time in South Africa and was much higher profile figure and he did a lot to badger Mrs Thatcher's government with a total lack of success I have to say but he battled away and yeah I always supported him and his efforts and to get them to see sense. It was hard going I was very proud of it proved right in the end

HS: um as you became more high-profile was it difficult to carry on your AA campaigns because obviously the ANC were labelled terrorists?

DS: no no not at all when I became leader of the Liberal Party in '76 I still included references to that in my Commons speeches it all in the record so I did continue...

HS: yeah sure. Looking back what are your feelings about your involvement in AA campaigning?

DS: looking back on it I'm very proud it, it was a great experience it was also quite formative because I was involved with people in other parties. The Liberal Party was quite small but the many people people active in the Labour Party not so many in the Conservative Party it has to be said but there were one or two but the experience of working cross party I really enjoyed and it did influence my political thinking later on on issues like the European involvement which was an all party effort the - the Lib-Lab pact if you like and the later alliance with the SDP all of these were influence by the cross party experience that I had early on in the AAM. I remember one episode we did a meeting in Edinburg in a YMCA theatre - with Andrew Faullds who was the Labour MP for Smethwick and a well know character because he was broadcasting and [bells] and it was rather a riotous meeting because member of the League of Empire Loyalists came in the back and were shouting and Andrew leapt off the stage and thumped one of them which was not the most diplomatic way of dealing and we had to call the police to eject them so - but again that was working across-party and then Andrew came home and stayed the night with us and we talked to the small hours of the evils of apartheid so the fact you know working with people in other parties was also very rewarding.

HS: yeah - you said in your book that you shared many Anti-Apartheid platforms in London with Oliver Tambo and Desmond Tutu can you describe what that experience was like?

DS: Desmond Tutu of course I got to know much later not when I was president. I visited him in umm in his house in South Africa then I met him on later occasions and meetings in London - a terrific character but the person I actually got to know best of them all was Thabo Mbeki because he was he was here until apartheid was abolished and he was able to return so he was very active in meetings, not just here in London but I think we were involved in meetings in Durban - and I can't remember where else but we really worked very well together, campaigning meetings really and strategy meetings about how to open up the ending of apartheid so he was the one I got to know the best

HS: yeah yeah - when you were doing this campaigning...

DS: the other one sorry I should mention is the education minister he died a couple of years ago and he was president of the Irish AAM errr his name's gone out of my head...

HS: I can fill it in the interview. [Kader Asmal]

DS: he was education minister under Thabo Mbeki and I think continued under Zuma but when I knew him he was president of the Irish AAM he was at Dublin university I went over and did a lecture for him - again great character and he actually came with Thabo when he was on a state visit that was at the Scottish parliament and I asked him to come and address the Scottish parliament and there was a very funny story about that because his programme was very tight on the state visit and he was discussing with Abdul Minty, who was then at that time in the foreign office of South Africa, I don't think I can really go to Edinburg it's too far on a short visit and Abdul told me afterwards he said: 'you do realise that David Steel is the speaker of the Scottish parliament and if you don't go he'll be very cross' and he said: 'oh my god alright then I better go' and he came and gave a great address to the parliament that's the picture of the Scottish and South African flag and when I retired from the speakership my private office wanted to give me something and they sent this photograph to Thabo and would they sign it for me and he wrote all over it 'great friend of South Africa'.

HS: Is that what it says? What does the message say?

DS: He was asked to sign it but he wrote all over the bottom of the photograph [laughter] reads 'with great affection a valued friend of the people of South Africa'

HS: amazing

DS: nice souvenir to have I thought it deserved to go on the wall

HS: so when you were doing these campaigns and sharing platforms with people like that did you see apartheid collapsing?

DS: no that's the interesting thing it's a good question because I didn't see it crumbling and in fact I've told the story in my book about meeting with Pik Botha, who was then the foreign minister at the time when Nelson Mandela was off Robben Island and on Pollsmoor and I had asked to go and visit him in prison and they'd refused and I'd said to Pik Botha 'why do you refuse me permission to see Nelson Mandela?' and he said 'I don't know why you people always want to go and see Nelson Mandela he's just a terrorist he's had no political experience, he's never even held a press conference' and then he added 'not that it's entirely his fault' which I thought was the most bizarre conversation and I remember it vividly that this is not real and so the answer to your question is I didn't see the end coming and it came very suddenly I think the final influence was the American one once America decided that black consciousness in America pushed the American administration support for sanctions and I think at that point the South African people gave up – that's my reading of it anyway- it happened quite suddenly.

HS: ummm final question. Is there anything else you'd like to say?

DS: Because of that I never met Nelson Mandela until he came to London I don't know how it happened when he came to visit the House of Commons and this was before he was president after he was released from I was given the honour of receiving him at the door of the House of Commons and there's a picture of me standing outside the house welcoming him to Parliament which was great, fantastic.

HS: Oh wow

HS: so yeah didn't expect to have that happen

DS: no - I just felt that you know people sometimes when they wrote about me oh well he never was prime minister, he never held ministerial office and I say yes *but* the two things I campaigned about Anti-Apartheid and the recreation of the Scottish Parliament and both were achieved and highly involved in so I may not have had power and I had the satisfaction of seeing student dreams come true so I'm very happy about that

HS: welcoming Nelson Mandela through the doors of House of Commons...

DS: that was the final thing yeah

HS: is there anything else you would like to say?

DS: I think we've covered everything we did brilliantly in the short time

HS: yes excellent. Thank you so much.