

Interview with Paul Blomfield by Iain Carew on 20 December 2012, reproduced on the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee Forward to Freedom project website <http://www.aamarchives.org/>

Iain Carew: First, can I ask you why did you get involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement?

Paul Blomfield: I got involved when I was at school and if I remember against a background of struggles for racial equality and justice in the '60s, in my childhood. This was the time of the civil rights movement in the States, being aware of the battles for justice in South Africa, and that obviously came to a head around the time of the sports tours in the late '60s, early '70s, and I remember seeing a poster at my school which had a picture of the Sharpeville massacre. It is a very famous graphic, a completely reduced monochrome graphic, of a South African policeman bringing a truncheon down on the heads of protesters and the slogan was 'If you could see their national sport you would be less keen to see their cricket', and it was just a very powerful image. So I wrote off, I must have been, I don't know, 14, 15, and I wrote off to the Anti-Apartheid Movement and said, 'Could you send me some more information' and they sent me back a book published by the United Nations which was just a collection of South African laws called Apartheid in Practice: A Commentary, just a collection of laws. And there were things like laws that, you know, if a black man sits on a park bench reserved for a white man he will be guilty of a criminal offence punishable by imprisonment of not more than six months and/or a fine of not more than 100 Rand or a whipping of not more than ten strokes and so on, and it was about being unlawful to teach black people how to read the Bible – I mean all sorts of stuff and it was very striking to me and I set up an anti-apartheid group in my school. And then when I became a student I set one up in my university, got quite involved at that stage. And later, when I was a member of the National Union of Students Executive, the African National Congress – this was in 1976 at the time of the Soweto uprising, which was another big peak of protest within South Africa, at a time before mobile telephones and the internet – the ANC asked me to go to South Africa, because as someone who was white and held a British passport it was relatively easy for me to move freely around the country to make contact with the growing black student movement, which I did and I came back and wrote a report for them.¹ But it was a very striking experience to spend some time inside South Africa just after the Soweto uprising, so then I had to leave earlier than I intended to because there was a big police clamp-down and I was aware the security police had become aware of my presence and they were following me and staying would have put other people at risk. But that is a very potted narrative, that is several years from school to being a student in the late '60s, early '70s, but then after that I set up the group in Sheffield.

IC: just going back to your visit to South Africa, can you just tell me a bit more about what you did over there?

PB: I think there is a box – there is a pamphlet – in the Sheffield group archives, and if not I could probably dig one up for you. But basically I spent time in Johannesburg and went down to Cape Town, I went out to the Cape Flats and some of the black communities around Cape Town, I went up to East London, where I was due to go out to King William's Town to meet Steve Biko. My contact there was Donald Woods, who was the white editor of the Daily Dispatch, which was one of the white English language liberal papers critical of apartheid. He was going to take me out to meet Biko and unfortunately Biko had been arrested. It wasn't the time they killed him in police detention, but it wasn't possible. I mean Donald was the author of Cry Freedom and his story of his flight from South Africa. Then I went up to

Durban and met with people involved with the opposition movement there. It was there where the Security Police started following my activities and I had to cut short my visit. But it was an opportunity to talk to ANC activists and young people involved in the struggle and to report that back both in terms of a public report and to also to brief people on what was happening.

IC: So did you see it as a worthwhile trip and did you gain any experience or life experience from it?

PB: I mean it reinforced my commitment to the Anti-Apartheid Movement and to the cause of social justice, but I was doing a job for the ANC, and you know there were lots of other people involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement who never had that opportunity, so I wouldn't put too much on that. I was privileged to be given that chance and opportunity by the ANC, but that was just one year out of, well a couple of weeks out of, 16 years involvement in the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

IC: So you said you first got involved while you were at school, but how did you get involved in the movement in Sheffield?

PB: Well, I set it up in Sheffield, I mean at that time I was at school in Tadcaster, when I used to live just outside York, and I organised some activities amongst friends at school raising funds and protesting outside Barclays Bank and I started to sell *Anti-Apartheid News* on a corner pitch on the streets of York. And that time I set up a group in York, but it was mainly involved in doing things in the student movement. Then I came back to Sheffield in 1978 and then set up a group in Sheffield, there was not one at the time, and talked to people in organisations who I thought would be sympathetic, and that was across churches, trade unions, people in the black and minority ethnic communities, student unions. And we set up a broad group in Sheffield which ultimately I think was certainly one of the biggest, and I often used to claim the biggest, in the country. We had about 700 or 800 members at the peak and we also got to the point where Sheffield was at the centre of various initiatives. For example, we were at the centre of co-ordinating local councils in action against apartheid. For a couple of years we hosted the national conference of the Anti-Apartheid Movement. We played a fairly leading role on the cultural boycott of South Africa. But above all, it was just involving lots of people across lots of organisations month in month out on different activities to promote the economic boycott of South Africa and to bring pressure on the regime and to raise funds for refugee camps, medical aid and other ways of supporting the struggle for liberation.

IC: So would you say when you set up the movement in Sheffield it was hard to convince people at first to join or did it pick up straight away or was it sort of a more gradual sort of movement?

PB: Well, Sheffield is a great city with a great radical tradition and the challenge was not convincing people of the arguments, the challenge was persuading people to find time to commit themselves to this particular group when there are lots of good causes campaigning for issues of social justice all around the world but by trying to identify a core of people across organisations. So I asked Frank Hooley, who was then the Member of Parliament for Sheffield Heeley, who was well known because he had done lots of work to promote the United Nations Association and was well regarded across a broader range of people, to be the group's chair, which he did. I asked the Bishop of Sheffield to be the group's President. I got an active member of the Council of Churches to be group treasurer. We had a vice-chair

from the trade union movement, a man called Len Crossley, who was a senior official in the Engineering Union. Frank was a Labour MP, but we had a Liberal councillor who was involved as well. And so there was kind of a breadth which gave the organisation credibility, but had a reach into other groups so that when we did something they would go into their networks and try and get people involved

IC: You previously mentioned about protesting outside Barclays. Can you tell me more about the places you would protest outside of and how the protest would take place?

PB: Yes, Barclays was clearly a significant focus for protest because they were the biggest UK bank operating in South Africa, and within South Africa they were the biggest bank in the apartheid economy. They played a pivotal role therefore in oiling the wheels of the South African regime and to seek to persuade them to disengage was clearly an important kind of strategic goal for isolating South Africa and we sought to bring pressure to bear on them in all sorts of ways. I mean the most obvious one was we used to stand outside branches of Barclays Bank and persuade people to take their accounts out, but people used to think that that was a fairly pointless activity. People would say to you 'There are three of you standing outside this branch of Barclays Bank. How on earth do you think you are going to persuade a major international bank to change its policy?' But that protest was only part of building up a groundswell of support and opposition to Barclays engagement in South Africa, so that at the same time that could be quite effective, we got a lot of publicity. There were days for example where we organised a boycott or organised a protest outside every Barclays branch in Sheffield. I can't remember, but at the time there must have been 40 or 50, so it was quite a big task to do. We then also started to persuade trade union branches, churches and voluntary organisations to take their big corporate accounts out of Barclays and ultimately over a period of time across the country the pressure paid off and Barclays recognised that their commercial interests across the world were being damaged by their continued engagement with the South African regime and that it was in their interest, the bigger interests of the bank, to disengage, and that was a pivotal moment in the '80s. But yes, the moment that Barclays said they were pulling back from South Africa was a turning point when other companies began to review their position and it became toxic to be associated with the South African regime.² And ultimately all of that led to de Klerk having to start the discussions with Mandela. Other things that we did, I mean we campaigned in particular for consumer boycotts of South Africa to persuade people not to buy Outspan oranges or Cape fruit or South African wine. We organised a lot of protests outside Tesco, who were at that time at the front end of supermarket retailers, and so they were a good focus. We tried to persuade people not to buy South African goods and at the same time we tried to persuade the shop to stop selling them. We got to the point where local Tesco's branches recognised that this was a difficult issue for them, we met with their branch managers. We never fully persuaded them to stop stocking the goods, but they got to a point where they were almost always giving an alternative so that it would never be South African exclusively. But to an extent the campaign to get people to boycott South African fruit was only one part of the wider campaign, because when you were asking people, talking to people as they were going to do their shopping on a Saturday, not to buy South African apples, you then had to engage with them about the bigger issue and you were winning hearts and minds for the economic boycott in general, so those were the sorts of things. Shell had a particular role in South Africa, we organised regular protests outside Shell stations and so on. The big companies that were getting a stake in South Africa were regularly targeted.

IC: So would you say then that you achieved everything you wanted to and on the whole would you see the Movement as a success, particularly in Sheffield?

PB: It had great success in Sheffield. The success was measured ultimately by the changes that took place in South Africa in 1994. It was always, I mean we were always a solidarity movement. We did not bring change, we supported the people of South Africa in bringing change, but I think that the two – pressure externally and the pressure internally coming together – did force change, and there are plenty of other conflicts around the world which have not been brought to successful conclusions, so yes, I mean the Movement was set up before I was involved in it, in 1959, to see a non-racial democracy in South Africa, and in 1994 the people of South Africa went to the polls on the basis of a non-racial franchise to elect a new government with Nelson Mandela as President. So yes, that was successful and the sort of activities we were involved in Sheffield, and other groups were involved in around the country, played a really important part in that. And it was not only in the UK, I mean the UK's Anti-Apartheid Movement was probably the biggest and most effective because of the historical links between our country and South Africa, but there were similar movements in other countries

IC: So how do you feel about your time in the Anti-Apartheid Movement and are you still in contact with other people who were heavily involved?

PB: It was an extraordinary campaign to be part of. It was, you know, when I first got involved in the late '60s and for many years, you felt that you had justice on your side but this was a big thing. I mean apartheid had been established in South Africa since 1948 and had its roots back beyond that. The South African regime was determined and deeply resistant to change. It had many powerful allies, partly because of the strategic importance of South Africa. So to think that you could play a part in bringing about fundamental change was optimistic. So the fact that we did made it a great campaign, to be a part of it was great – to bring so many people together in it as well, from so many different backgrounds, who were united around that one simple goal of social and racial justice in South Africa, and to see people giving a considerable amount of time to that cause. And for me, as someone who remains involved in a different sort of politics, it shows the value of getting engaged in politics, it shows the power of the people when they come together around a common goal. You can change things, so I think there are enduring lessons like that, as well as the extraordinary feeling you got when you saw in 1994 people having the opportunity to vote for the first time and voting with great pride and queueing for hours and hours to vote for the first election in their lives to bring Mandela and the ANC to power. So yes, it was a great campaign to be a part of. I keep in touch with our successor organisation ACTSA (Action for Southern Africa), although I am not deeply involved in it, and I mean having got involved in 1968 and having stayed involved and having for most of the following 26 years either been a local group secretary or a student group secretary or on the National Executive. But after 1994 I moved on to different things, but I have kept in touch with people.

IC: So like you were saying that the Movement brought people from all sorts of social backgrounds and groups together, would you say that the Movement helped bring Sheffield as a whole into more of a closer community through the Movement?

PB: That is probably too big a claim. Sheffield has always had a great radical tradition. We were at the cutting edge of protest against slavery, for universal suffrage and the Chartist movement. We were the first major city in the country to elect a Labour Council in 1926 and the Labour Council did some fantastic things in terms of tackling slum housing, child poverty

and all sorts of things, so there has always been that sort of radical tradition. So I think we were all part of it, but I don't think we can claim more than that.

IC: So you said that you established the AAM, and once you had it established did you stay very much at the forefront of it? Were you very active personally in protests?

PB: Oh yes, from setting it up in Sheffield in 1978, I think I was Secretary of the group and so co-ordinating a lot of our activities right through until – you will have to check the records – but I think it was '91 or '92 and then Kath Harding took it on, and I think I was Vice Chair or something until we wound it up. The other thing that we also set up was something called the Southern African Resources Centre, which was the sort of charitable arm of our activities, which was focused on educational work about South Africa and supporting schools with projects and supporting teachers with educational resources. And we shared between the Anti-Apartheid Movement and the Southern Africa Resources project an office in St Matthew's Church on Carver Street. I think we were the only local group that got ourselves into the position where we were able to afford to employ somebody on a part-time basis to sustain those activities, and indeed have an office. So yes I stayed pretty much involved through the entire period.

IC: So after 1994 did the Movement then just branch off into different routes?

PB: Well, we wound up because we were set up as the Anti-Apartheid Movement to defeat apartheid and by 1994 we had, so at that point solidarity with the people of Southern Africa took a new form. I mean I stayed on as a trustee of the Southern Africa Scholarship Fund at the university and we continued to bring students over from not just South Africa but the states of Southern Africa affected by apartheid, so that included Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Angola, Namibia and Botswana. We raised the funds and brought students over to study at Sheffield University right through it and we still are, so that group still continues because there was a different role for post-apartheid reconstruction and Action for Southern Africa continues with providing solidarity in different ways – in raising issues in relation to HIV/AIDS, which is a huge problem in South Africa and a range of other issues. But it was at that stage that I thought after about 26 years that I would focus on something else.

IC: So did those sort of groups and movements, did they flow naturally or did you actively set out to set those kinds of things up?

PB: The Southern Africa scholarship scheme at the university was set up before me. It was at the time of the what was misnamed the Extension of University Education Act in South Africa, which I think was 1962,³ and what the so-called Extension of University Education Act did was to exclude black students from white universities, and so across the UK at that time many people said we will set up scholarships to give black students the opportunity to study in the UK. Students and staff at Sheffield University did that, I became involved in it when I started working there in 1978, and I was a trustee right through until the current time. The focus for it changed after 1994 because we were giving basic undergraduate education to South Africans and after 1994 all of the universities were opened regardless of race, so that purpose did not exist any more. So we consulted with the ANC and with colleagues in South Africa that there is still a role to provide more advanced study in areas where people can come back and contribute by educating within South Africa itself. So then we changed it to focus on postgraduate programmes, mainly in the areas of health and education and that is what it has been doing since then. Nationally, Action for Southern Africa was set up by some of the people who had been alongside me on the National Executive in the Anti-Apartheid

Movement. I mean many of them are still involved in it. In Sheffield we took the decision that in general we would wind up the Anti-Apartheid Movement because it had done its job.

IC: Are there possibly any regrets that you have about your time in the Movement?

PB: That we didn't end apartheid sooner? No, I think, as I said earlier it was an extraordinary campaign. It brought together a great group of people, offered them a wide range of different ways of protesting and making their voice heard. So some people focused on the consumer boycott, some people got involved – and it was quite a big thing in Sheffield – in the cultural boycott of South Africa. We decided as a city not to allow our venues to be used by artists and entertainers who were on the UN blacklist for breaching the cultural boycott of South Africa. So there some very big names were refused stages in Sheffield and there were some very big protests. I remember one in which Marti Caine, who was a very popular Sheffield-born entertainer, was in the Christmas show, or maybe it wasn't the Christmas show, but there was a major show at the Crucible and we organised a big protest in what was then – it's now Tudor Square – but what was then a car park just outside the Crucible on the opening night, and we got a protest that went on for about two hours and we had speakers from an extraordinary range of organisations and about 200 or 300 people protesting and nobody went to the show. Nobody was physically stopped, nobody was barred entry, but nobody wanted to go. And similarly when before the boycott there were some big names at the City Hall. We had torchlight vigils with the Bishop of Sheffield and leading members representing a cross-section of the community. It was very impressive, it both put pressure on the regime, but it also raised the general issues of apartheid, because that sporting and social isolation of South Africa the white regime felt deeply. Ultimately the economic isolation was the key factor. So people got involved in those sort of activities and others got involved in raising funds for refugee camps for those who had been forced to flee South Africa. So, no I don't think any real regrets other than, as I say, if we had had twice as many people involved and got there twice as quickly, that would have been great.

IC: So, just going back to the protest outside the Crucible, you mentioned it was 200 or 300 protesters. Would you say that the support for protest was always at that level? Were people always supportive of it?

PB: No, we built up over the years, and I think if you are involved in those sorts of movements you've got to be quite careful what you do. I mean we had one year in the mid-80s just after a wave of protests inside South Africa had been met with fairly harsh repression, we had a march through the city centre and we got about 10,000 people on it. Now you have to call an initiative like that at the right time so that it's a demonstration and show of strength rather than weakness, and so when the issue was in the headlines and people were outraged, you kind of seized the moment to give voice to that. There were plenty of other events we organised, like the protests outside Barclays, that went on year in year out where we had half a dozen people, so we judged, yes we tried to judge carefully our protests to attract the right numbers of people to have an effect. The biggest one was the demonstration in the mid-80s with about 10,000 people, and that was probably one of the biggest demonstrations that took place outside London or Glasgow or Edinburgh.

IC: So have you been back to South Africa since 1994 and if so are the changes very noticeable?

PB: No, I've never been back. I always swore after I was forced out the country in '76 that I would always go back after the country was free but I never have. I nearly went last year, but

it didn't come off, and at some stage I should, because South Africa is a country which faces, still faces, many deep problems and the legacy of apartheid hasn't fully been overcome. I mean I think the transition has been extraordinary, I mean if you take a country where 18% of the population on the basis of the colour of their skin, on the basis of being white, enjoyed one of the most privileged lifestyles anywhere in the world, and then you have the other 92%, no sorry do my maths right, 82% of the population, on the colour of their skin, facing real poverty, with some of the worst rates of malnutrition and malnutrition rate diseases like kwashiorkor outside of the Indian sub-continent, to actually go from that sort of inequality to a society in which everyone has a vote was an extraordinary transformation. And although South Africa still has many problems, the fact that they have managed to maintain a democratic society and it hasn't imploded is an extraordinary achievement. The way that they have dealt with post-apartheid reconciliation through things like the Truth and Justice Commission where they forced, they created conditions where instead of taking people from the apartheid regime who were guilty of terrible crimes, terrible brutalisation of opposition, and saying 'We're not going to jail you or imprison you or take retribution. If you participate in the Truth and Justice Commission, own up and face up to the responsibility for what you did and acknowledge and say it was wrong'. And it's interesting that in moving to a situation of relative peace in Northern Ireland and relative cross-community cohesion we looked to that South African process for an example and some of the people who were involved in the transition of South Africa advised in moving the situation in Northern Ireland forward. So yes, it's a country I really ought to go back to. I haven't, it has major problems but it's also achieved a great deal

IC: So would you say your time being in the AAM has had a big impact on the politician you are today?

PB: Yes, at all sorts of levels. I mean I don't think I would have, well, I got into politics through the Anti-Apartheid Movement. In the Anti-Apartheid Movement I then began to at the same time get involved with other issues in terms of tackling racism in this country and recognise the links between racism and wider social injustice and other forms of discrimination. I became then more involved in other organisations from the perspective that that gave me, and ultimately took the view that you can only really achieve change by engaging in party politics and it must have been 12 or 13 years after getting involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement that I joined the Labour Party. So yes, it had a lasting impact on me and also the lesson that it gave in terms of the power of politics, that actually by bringing people together for a common purpose and raising your voice even when others around you say you're wasting your time you can bring real change. So I guess that's a lasting lesson too.

¹ See stu25 'IUS Solidarity Mission Report' on this website

² Barclays Bank withdrew from South Africa in 1986.

³ The misnamed South African Extension of University Act barred black students from South African universities. It was passed in 1959.