

Interview with Vella Pillay by Håkan Thörn, 7 March 2000, reproduced on the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee Forward to Freedom project website
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Håkan Thörn: Could you say very briefly when you were born and where, and what organisations related to the anti-apartheid struggle you have participated in and what positions of trust you held.

Vella Pillay: Yes. My name is Vella Pillay. I am South African by birth, of Indian origin. I was born on 8 October 1923, which means that I am now 77 years old. I grew up in South Africa and left for England to take advanced economic studies at the London School of Economics. I came here at the beginning of the 1950s, for that particular purpose. In South Africa I was active in the South African Indian Congress and in the ANC as a student, and at Witwatersrand University. I was active in student politics, and when I came to England I took part in continuing South African liberation support activities, organising meetings with South Africans and initiating the beginnings of a campaign of solidarity with the boycott of South African goods that developed in the 1950s. In that period there were a growing number of South African exiles arriving and we began to initiate policies towards the setting up of the AAM. The AAM was basically set up in 1958,¹ at a meeting in London, and it developed from that. I was the first Treasurer of the AAM and continued in that position for quite some time, until I then was appointed as the Vice-Chairman, and for a while continued in that position. I was on the Executive of the AAM from the time of its foundation until it was dissolved, following the overthrow of the apartheid regime in South Africa.

HT: How would you explain the fact that there have been quite a few Indian exiles active in the anti-apartheid struggle here in Britain?

VP: That is easily explained. Indians were able to travel abroad more easily, were able to get passports to leave the country more easily. Africans had great difficulties; whites of course had all the facilities to travel abroad quite easily. So once young Indians came to England, not as exiles, but to further their studies, they began to sort of converge. From there they developed a kind of political understanding of the situation in South Africa, and active in the anti-apartheid cause. As a result of that many of them were not able to go back to South Africa until after South Africa's liberation.

HT: What were your most important international contacts during those years – I mean the AAM as an organisation, and following that I would also like to know if you had any particular contacts with Swedish people and organisations?

VP: I personally never had any Swedish contacts, but there were other of my colleagues who developed such contacts, like Abdul Minty and others. Another colleague of mine was Ronald Segal, the author, who developed very close contacts with various Swedish individuals at an early stage. What international organisations were we been involved with? We worked very much with the British trade union movement and the British Labour and Liberal Parties. We worked extremely hard on those kind of things. We got very strong support from the British Communist Party. They helped us enormously with facilities, when we had no place to work and things of that character. We tried to establish contacts with the international trade union movement, the ICFTU and the other federation, to get their support

¹ The Boycott Movement was set up in 1959 and the Anti-Apartheid Movement in March 1960.

and especially to provide financial aid and training facilities for young black trade unionists in South Africa. But in the process of developing this work over the period, the scale and the nature of the AAM's activities began to widen almost by accident. People used to come and say, 'Look, what do we do about stopping teachers from going to work in South Africa?' So we thought 'Let's run a campaign in the schools about conditions in South Africa. Let's try to educate the children about South African conditions so that they can express their solidarity with blacks in South Africa'. Somebody said, 'There are these English bands who are going to South Africa, and they are only allowed to play to white audiences, can't we try and stop that?'. That opened up the whole campaign to stop cultural exchanges with South Africa. English students who became aware of what was going on in South Africa began to raise with us the question of their university having contacts and relationships with South African. White universities in South Africa prevented blacks from becoming students so we conducted university campaigns to break British universities' links with South Africa. Then there were other professional organisations, like the architects organisation. So these things began to multiply into major forms of campaigning. The biggest one, of course, was the breaking of sporting links, in which Peter Hain played a notable part. It sort of developed, it just evolved, and as it evolved, we began to establish contacts with supporting organisations in other countries, in Sweden, in Norway, in other countries in Europe and anti-apartheid movements were set up in Germany, Belgium, France, and Italy, and in Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and of course in India and so on. So it began to flourish on an international basis. The key problem for us was to embark upon far more decisive forms of boycott, that would be able to cripple the South African economy and regime. This touched on two or three basic questions – trade matters, official trade, and secondly the flow of capital to South Africa, and third the flow of financial aid or financial loans to South Africa by international banks. These were the three issues, and in these three areas I was crucially involved – as a banker – Economics is my profession. I realised the importance of these things, and in order to work on this through the AAM I made frequent visits to the United States – to pressure the IMF, to help put pressure on the banks in New York. American black institutions forced the banks to cancel all loans to South Africa, on the basis of blacks withdrawing or cancelling their bank accounts with Chase Manhattan and all these big banks. We succeeded in that, and in my judgement that particular final flourish of the boycott – the ending of bank loans to South Africa, and the closing of the IMF door to South Africa and foreign investment in South Africa completely collapsing broke the back of the South African apartheid regime. That opened the door to the release of Mandela.

HT: I think that you mentioned when we met briefly at the Houses of Parliament last week that you met some Swedish economists?

VP: Oh, yes there is a Swedish economist – but his name escapes me. He is in – Uppsala, not the Africa Institute, but an institute of development economics. After the release of Mandela the ANC set up a group of economists to try to work and prepare a plan for a macroeconomic policy for a new liberated government. I was invited by the ANC to be the Coordinator and Director of that project. It was called the Macro-Economic Research Group, under the ANC's leadership. We received money from the Swedish Government, as well as from the Canadians and Australians. I took the opportunity of inviting economists from abroad to help us in the development of this programme, because we wanted to get the international experience, of what one should move from. Your policy is based on revolutionary thought, once you get to the reality of how you transform an economy like South Africa's which is built on cheap labour and the result is mass poverty. How do you do that? So I brought in economists from India and Sweden, from Australia, from America and

so on. The idea was to devise a macro-economic programme in order to find a way in which the most rapid development could take place that would be able to erode the poverty we inherited. I invited Mats Lundahl – he is a very good friend – and he worked with us for a while. We did the work at the University of Witwatersrand. I worked there from 1991 to 1994.

HT: The AAM and the anti-apartheid struggle in a much broader sense was an extremely broad movement, and I mean there was a strong consensus on fighting apartheid, but there were also a lot of tensions within this struggle or within this Movement. What would you say were the most important tensions or conflicts within the Movement that also reflected ideological differences?

VP: Well, we were working in a Cold War situation from the 1950s onwards, and you know what that meant for the British Government, including the Labour Party, for the American Government and for all the governments of Europe. The alignment with South Africa on their side against the Soviet Union and China meant that they would support South Africa and its system of racism. That was the international framework in which we were working, and one inevitably got involved in taking positions on the Cold War, although we were very careful. Our primary function was to win a large number of supporters for the overthrow of the South African regime, with the result that left-wing groups in the Labour Party, Liberal organisations, church organisations, who took a very much more principled position towards the question of racism, all these people were brought into the struggle. On the other hand the South Africans were countering what we were doing by nourishing a whole series of more fascist based organisations within the major political parties, in the Conservative Party and above all in business. The fact was that British investments in South Africa were extremely large, Britain was the dominant economic power there, so these were the sort of tensions that were always around. It was very easy for those who were opposed to the AAM, and for the South Africans who were conducting their propaganda, to pinpoint all anti-apartheid South Africans as nothing else but creatures of the Communists, which was totally untrue. We got support from the Communist Party, there is no question about that, and that support was absolutely right. It was the only political party that had an infrastructure to give us support.

HT: I think in Sweden that issue came up more in the '70s. In the '60s you didn't have so much this discussion about Communism, while from the middle of the '70s you would have organisations, liberal or churches or at least forces within those organisations that would be suspicious about supporting the ANC because of this Communist issue. Was this an issue here in Britain all along, from the early '60s up until the '90s, or were there differences?

VP: From the early '50s onwards it was there, it was always in the background of our work, always a bit of a problem. And the South Africans were promoting continuous stories – this man is a Communist and so on. So you had all these problems, and the South African Government developed a vast network, not only spies, but also of saboteurs and people of that character. They blew up our offices four times, and did a whole series of other things, tried to poison several of us and so on. So all these things were there. It was a rough period. But there was nevertheless a section of the community basically based on common sense. You would go to the university – for example the London School of Economics. I said 'Look, I am South African and your university establishes and maintains links with South African universities that don't allow people like me to study there. How can you justify that?' They said 'We can't justify that. I will take this thing up.' And of course after a lot of struggles on they decided to break all relations. That happened with Birmingham and some of the other

universities as well, and we were very successful. So there were good people around, just purely on the question of their opposition to racism. They didn't ask 'Are you supporting the Soviet Union? Are you an extremist?' We found this among church people as well. So I don't want to say that it was difficult all along the line, it was quite easy. The British Government had an organisation called the British Commonwealth Universities Fund, so we asked them to stop having links with South Africa, because we told them that they were sustaining white education. It took us about a year to convince them. The academics took a much more open attitude towards these things, without asking what our political alignment was.

HT: Who was the main opponent of the AAM, except for the South African government of course?

VP: The Conservative Party was a consistent opponent, sections of British business, major sections. Key supporters were the trade unions and the popular movements, within the liberal left as you could call it.

HT: But you still had Conservatives in the movement. I know that there were a few...

VP: We had probably two or three people, who came in. But they were people without any kind of influence, not prominent members of the Conservative Party. One was a lord called Lord Altrincham. He was a fine man, but he had no position in the Conservative Party. He was just a lord.

HT: It seems that an important difference between Sweden and England was that in Sweden the anti-apartheid movement, especially ISAK, put most of its effort into publicising the involvement of the steel industry in South Africa. It seems to me as if the British movement were more criticising the Government, Labour or Conservative. Would you agree with that?

VP: I would certainly agree with that. The Labour Party and the Labour Government were mavericks. They said one thing and did the exact opposite. We were calling in the early 1960s for an arms embargo against South Africa, to stop the flow of British arms to the South African army and police. Harold Wilson was then the leader of the Labour Party. We invited him to give a speech in Trafalgar Square and he promised that when Labour Government was elected, the first thing he would do would be to impose an embargo on the supply of arms. He made a public statement. In the next election, in 1964, he got elected. He said 'Yes, I am raising the matter with the Cabinet, and then we got the information that they are supplying all kinds of bullets and guns and so on to the South African police. The Labour Party just couldn't carry it out. I remember the man running the Foreign Office at the time for the Labour Government, a man called Thomson.² We said to him 'Look, the Prime Minister promised that there would be an arms embargo, and here *The Times* is carrying a story that a substantial amount of arms are being sent to the South African police, not to the army but to the police. He said that the report was incorrect. This man told us a straightforward lie and he was the Secretary for Foreign Affairs. This was the kind of double dealing that we had to deal with with the Labour Party. We told James Callaghan when he was Prime Minister, 'Look, several countries in the world have stopped investments in South Africa.' He said 'We can't do it, our business companies are so implicated there, we can't do it'.

² George Thomson was Minister of State at the Foreign Office.

But ultimately the campaign that we led, the final campaign in order to stop bank loans succeeded. Investment flows of capital to South Africa became increasingly difficult because of the tensions. The townships became ungovernable because the children went on strike from school. They just took over the townships. They attacked the police and children were being killed. Secondly, black trade unions, in spite of the laws against them, began to be formed. They began to organise strikes, in the mines and so on, and you had a very tense period. These two developments, together with the kind of education that we had been doing over the years against apartheid, made it possible for us to really bring intense pressure for the end of all bank loans. What happened was that the situation in South Africa was creating great pressure on the South African balance of payments, let alone on the economy, and they actually depended on borrowing from abroad in order to sustain the exchange rate of their currency. We tackled that – no loans from the IMF, great pressure on the banks to stop loans. We organised huge campaigns in this country for people, students and others, to withdraw their accounts from Barclays Bank, which was the main bank that was providing loans to the South African Reserve Bank. I went to the US and spoke to black organisations. A whole group of them marched to Chase Manhattan Bank, walked in there and said: 'We are going to boycott, the blacks are going to boycott your bank unless you give us a guarantee that you will stop providing loans to South Africa'. Chase Manhattan told South Africa that they would not roll over the loans. Once they did that all the other American banks did the same thing, and all the British banks in the Commonwealth, and the back of the South African economy was broken. So they released Mandela, under great pressure from the British and the American Governments. They said 'You had better get this man out of prison and start talking to him, otherwise you are going to have a hell of a bloody revolution in this country. There will be tremendous violence'.

HT: Have you got time for a last question? How would you characterise the relations between the AAM in Britain and the British media and did it change over the years?

VP: It certainly changed. We developed good relations with civilised journalists on the Guardian. It was a very helpful paper, and a whole series of others, even the *Sunday Times*. Some journals would carry our stories, even the *Financial Times*. I remember several interviews that I gave that were carried in the *FT*. So we were all the time struggling, but you could have good journalists, and many of them came to us and said that they were prepared to help. We ran a paper called *Anti-Apartheid News*, and some mainstream journalists helped and wrote articles for us. Of course they were constrained by their editors on their own papers. But nevertheless we developed very good relationships with some journalists, although we were not always successful in getting the mass media to support us. We had the same kind of experience with journalists on TV and radio. They were constrained by what their editors would allow them to do – the TV companies and so on. But we had some very good journalists on the editorial board of our paper.

HT: It was more in the sense that they were writing for AA News than that they were doing a lot of work in the established media?

VP: That's right, they did their normal work at the established media, subject to the policy of their paper. But their instinct was to support the AAM and they would come in the evenings and work for us.

HT: Did they have difficulties in writing articles in the sort of places where they worked?

VP: There obviously were difficulties. Some of them got over that and just did it. But gradually in the 1980s, even the editors of the major papers began to become a bit more open towards AA News. And they did interviews with liberation movement leaders and so on.

HT: Thank you very much.

VP: You're welcome.