

Interview with David Blunkett by Sam Parkin and Jonathan Dobson on 21 February 2013, reproduced on the Anti-Apartheid Movement Archives Committee Forward to Freedom project website <http://www.aamarchives.org/>

Sam Parkin: Thank you for letting us speak to you today.

David Blunkett: You're very welcome

SP: Under your leadership Sheffield Council formally announced itself to be officially anti-apartheid. First of all, what personal involvement did you have with this decision and can you give us any reflections on the influence that you had on making this decision?

DB: The Labour Party in Sheffield had raised with the Labour group of councillors the issue what more could we do in terms of the anti-apartheid campaign. The Labour Party had been very heavily involved and had, through people like Richard Caborn and Paul Blomfield, both of whom chaired the city party during the 1980s, very close links with Anti-Apartheid and in particular with the ANC, and therefore those links for campaigning already existed. The question was what more could Sheffield City Council do, and there were several things we thought we could do. One very prominent and I think significant measure was to host a major anti-apartheid conference, which happened to coincide with the birth of my third son. So I remember it very well, because the conference was taking place and I had to leave to go to the maternity hospital for his birth. The conference organisers wanted me to call him Nelson, but we'd already decided to call him Andrew Kier, and we didn't do that, but it was a very important moment because we had the external leaders of the ANC, those who were not in South Africa and adjoining areas like Mozambique, those who were actually part of the world-wide promotional campaign were able to come, including Oliver Tambo, so it was a really important moment and we were able to facilitate that, to provide the host facilities and town hall and conference facilities, and to really give them a platform, which they used very effectively. We also looked at practical measures that we might take in adjoining areas like Namibia, where we actually helped with social work support, so there were practical issues in relation to anti-apartheid, but also the outreach, trying to help those who were on the fringe of South Africa and were very often the victims of South African policy.

SP: You spoke about Paul Blomfield being the chair of the group set up in the city. Was there anything you personally involved yourself in with regards to this group?

DB: At the time, by 1983, I was elected to the Labour Party's National Executive Committee and therefore I had a role nationally in linking what we were doing from the city with what was happening in the country as a whole and the anti-apartheid struggle. Obviously, because of having that platform both as the leader of the council, which was a prominent position at the time because we were in the forefront of battling against the policies of Margaret Thatcher's government, and because we are very large, and because we had very radical policies of our own, that profile offered the opportunity, along with being a member of the National Executive Committee, to be able to speak and promote the campaign's objectives. So that was helpful and I was able to use that. It would be quite wrong of me to say that I was in a prominent position, but I was in a supportive role rather than actually running the campaign, but very deeply committed to it. I had been committed to it way back in the late 1960s and beginning of the

1970s when I was a student at the University of Sheffield and I remember going on the anti-apartheid marches.

Jonathan Dobson: That's brilliant. Could you just tell us a bit more about the anti-apartheid marches? It's really interesting to know...

DB: Very, very large events. There was so much going on at the time, there were marches against the Vietnamese war and there were anti-apartheid marches. The march I remember in Manchester at Trafford was interesting because it was the first time in my life that I had ever had a flask of tea examined to see if it was a dangerous weapon [*laughter*] by the police, so you're bringing back memories now of an era where I was considered to be a revolutionary radical just by being involved. Of course student politics was extraordinarily prominent in the late 1960s and early '70s. There'd been the major upheavals in France and university politics itself was febrile in the late '60s when people were organising sit-ins and all sorts of things. I was just at the end of that era, things were calming down and people were starting to take exams again [*laughter*] when I was a student from '69-'72.

SP: Now what do you think it is about Sheffield, obviously at the time it was embraced as the alternative capital of the north and was known for its left-wing policies. What do you think it is about Sheffield that allowed that to happen and saw that prosper?

DB: The history goes back a long way in terms of radical trade unionism at the time of, in the 19th century, celebrated in a play called *The Stirrings in Sheffield on a Saturday Night*, which has been put on a number of times here in Sheffield, which recalled the struggle of the trade union movement, the quite violent reaction to the actions of employers all the way through to holding the peace conference in 1950 when Picasso came. And I'm sorry to say that a number of the people who were going to participate were banned from coming into the country by the Labour government, on the grounds that they were seen as being a front for the Soviet Union, which I think was unfortunate. But Picasso they couldn't ban, so he came to speak and that was again a very very prominent conference, so there had been a history of Sheffield's radicalism. There's a man called David Price you might want to talk to, because he's written a book, and he will be really good on this, because he's made it a particular focus of his work, in terms of looking at that side of the history. Strange really, because on the other side of Sheffield of course the city was built on, and a great deal of wealth was created by the armaments industry, linked to special steels. This year is the centenary of the creation of stainless steel by Brierly and that played a prominent part in the First and Second World Wars. So really there's been both a radical international movement in Sheffield and there's been a city that's had its historic wealth created by being involved in weapons, which actually most people in Sheffield saw as being used in a good cause in the Second World War.

JD: I just want to ask, obviously you would have some dealings with the Conservative government, with Thatcher. Did you have any opposition within the city from when you put Sheffield up as an anti-apartheid zone?

SB: Very little. Conservatism in Sheffield has been a fairly middle of the road brand, it has to be said, over the years, which explains why Nick Clegg is the MP for Sheffield Hallam, because most Tories were quite happy to vote Lib Dem. And therefore there was a little bit of jumping up and down. The leader of South Yorkshire County Council Tories, Irvine Patnick, who died

recently, was the MP for Sheffield Hallam prior to '97 and he'd made some very odd remarks in relation to apartheid, but hadn't opposed vehemently what we were doing in the 1980s. It was strange because in the 1980s there were a whole group of Conservative MPs nationally who were just blatantly in favour of the apartheid regime, almost unashamedly so. Of course everybody now remembers how much they supported Nelson Mandela, and how awful apartheid was, but that wasn't quite as it was at the time. A lot of people were apologists for the South African government.

SP: What seems strange to us, as a generation that were brought up after apartheid, is how anyone couldn't support this movement and why it took so long for somewhere such as Sheffield to announce itself as formally anti-apartheid. Now I've done research and seen that Margaret Thatcher had links with the Pretoria government – that stopped her, obviously, supporting the Anti-Apartheid Movement. What other reasons were there though that there wasn't big support?

DB: Well, I think the two very big reasons were commercial, that there were many commercial interests linking the UK and South Africa in terms of right-wing politicians and business people; and secondly, they were seeking to portray, and this is almost a justification of their position, rather than a cause of it, they were seeking to present the ANC as a revolutionary, violent force. So they were portraying the ANC all the time as being terrorists and people who were to be feared. I use the term 'justification' because that what it was. They knew in their heart of hearts that the real issue was apartheid and the suppression of the majority of people in South Africa, and the whole undemocratic racist nature of what that entailed, but in order to be able to live with themselves they attempted to say that the ANC were the ones who were committing violent acts, whereas actually very often they were reacting to the violence of the regime. So there were two reasons, you mentioned, why places like Sheffield weren't in the forefront earlier. I think part of the answer is that people had until that period of time in our local government history seen local government very much as a deliverer of services and that it was none of their business to get involved in wider campaigns, and there was a shift in attitude in the late '70s and certainly during the 1980s, which said that we have a voice on behalf of people of the city, we have a responsibility morally and politically and we should, within sensible bounds of probity and prudence, actually be able to use that. Now sometimes that carried us a bit far, on nuclear free zones, thinking back on it, it was a bit bizarre sometimes, but on anti-apartheid it wasn't, because of course what we were doing in terms of combating racism had everything to do with the society we were living in here in Sheffield, the increasing number of people from across the world who were settling in the city and the kind of city we wanted to be, the kind of place we wanted to be seen to be, and the kind of welcome we wanted to offer to people. So the link between fighting apartheid and racism in South Africa and combating racism here at home was very clear. And I think that's very important because otherwise people think well what on earth has local government got to do with the South African regime.

SP: Now following the end of apartheid, how far personally have you been involved and taken interest in South African politics, have you made any efforts to see the reparation of the country?

DB: I've been very privileged to have met Nelson Mandela three times, once having a private audience with him, and I've been to Robben Island and been in the cell block and also into the little cave where they used to seek refuge from the sun when they were breaking stone, and so

it's been very close to my heart. I've been into Soweto and talked to people there and tried to put myself in the position of those who were literally putting their life on the line for the freedom of their people and for overcoming racism. So I have kept in touch with people since. I thought when the apartheid regime was overthrown that there was a little bit too much of people from other parts of the world, like the UK, going and telling them what they ought to do. And I think what we needed to do, and what I personally tried to do, was to say if there's anything I can do just let me know, particularly as I've had a long-standing interest in education. So going round the townships and seeing where education was available, one of the biggest problems was actually getting the youngsters to the schools and helping with disability issues, but not seeking to go and tell people what they should be doing, which is kind of a throwback to colonialism really.

JD: Did the City Council have any direct actions, links with South Africa, like say South African politics or people out there who were maybe trying to help them out?

DB: You mean people who were on the side of the regime?

JD: Yes.

DB: Not explicitly. There were people who'd had commercial links. The former chairman of Sheffield Wednesday, Bert McGee, had links with South Africa, but they didn't exactly parade them.

SP: Are there any more reflections you'd like to give to us on the period as a whole, about Sheffield?

DB: It was a very febrile period because there was so much going on. The Thatcher government had made it clear that they brooked no opposition and the measures they took against local government in terms of taking away the power to raise the rates, centralising the business rate, which used to be levied locally, bringing in laws for banning local government from campaigning, were all really in order to stop local government being a voice of opposition, both to the central government and to international policies of the central government at the time of the Conservatives, which we were opposing. So there were very tough measures taken against local democracy on the grounds that it was seen as a challenge. Keith Jackson, who was Vice-Principal of the Northern Residential College, wrote a little book called *Democracy in Crisis: The Town Halls Respond*, and if you can find a copy in the library it might be worth just taking a look, because we do touch on – it was written in 1987 – and we do touch on the years leading up to 1987 and what was happening more broadly. For instance in South Yorkshire we introduced a transport policy where you could travel free in the city centre, you could travel for tuppence if you were under 18 and you could travel anywhere in the area for 10p, and it worked really well and central government didn't like that either. So there were a whole range of policies – we were trying to combat the massive reduction in skilled jobs, I mean this was a time a time of total flux where we lost 50,000 jobs in a three-year period in steel and engineering. They were high status jobs, high quality jobs and people had a real problem adjusting, I mean putting *The Full Monty* on across the road in the theatre. I didn't like *The Full Monty* because I thought whilst it was extremely clever it was poking fun at, rather than understanding, the enormity of the change that was taking place, which actually changed the nature of community, of relationships within families and the way people saw themselves. I think there's a study to be

done on it, but I didn't think it was a study underpinned by believing that it was a joke. I think I got two jokes out of the whole *Full Monty*.

SP: You speak about this time and the loss of skilled jobs. How far do you think a lot of this support for these left-wing policies came as a backlash to this, I mean, obviously around the city, including within my family, my father is from Woodhouse which is next to Orgreave. Now at the time my father talks of his involvement in anti-apartheid marches, but says a lot of this was a backlash?

DB: You cannot separate out the economic, the industrial and the social. You had radical local government policies, you had the miners strike and the struggle to save their jobs and the dignity of those working in the mines. In the 1980s my home was only half a mile from Orgreave as well. You had movements like the Anti-Apartheid Movement and they all came together in frustration and anger at what was happening, not just from Margaret Thatcher's government, but internationally the right were very dominant, we'd had in the 1970s the overthrow of the Unidad regime in Chile. There was a feeling that the right were dominant and were prepared to use the power of the state in whatever way they felt was appropriate. And there was a backlash to that as you saw, in the industrial struggle and in other aspects of our political and social life in local government.

SP: Any more reflections on present day South Africa and how you feel that since the ending of apartheid the country has developed?

DB: What's interesting is that the living standards, the investment in equal opportunity, the sheer scale of the challenge in terms of housing people and providing them with safety and security internally, is almost overwhelming and I think we are at a tipping point where I hope that the ANC-led government can deliver on the bread and butter issues which are so crucial to people. Because doing away with apartheid didn't do away with innate discrimination and didn't do away with gross inequality, it didn't do away with people living in squalor. And people have moved on now and said we had the struggle, it was against racism and suppression but it was also a struggle for a better tomorrow and they're still struggling to deliver the better tomorrow.

JD: Did Sheffield council have links to other councils that may have had strong links to anti-apartheid?

DB: Yes, all these movements that were happening in local government tended to develop with, not heavy formal links, but with organised conferences and meetings where people would share what they were doing. They'd try and share in terms of resources for laying on events and for welcoming visitors to the country, because the central government weren't welcoming ANC representatives and those fighting apartheid and we were trying to do it instead, if you see what I mean. I mean normally when people come from overseas and they've got a message the government of the day will at least facilitate that, but that wasn't the case here, so we were having to do it. Those informal links existed, so that people could meet and they could come together and share.

JD: Did you use to get a lot of refugees who came from South Africa to Sheffield?

DB: Very little. Some, I mean we actually had a lot more from Chile than we did from South Africa. There was a tendency for those fighting the regime to either stay or to join the brigades

that were operating from Mozambique and Tanzania. And so there wasn't the tendency to, as there was with Chile, for people to know that they were named and being sought and persecuted and having to get out. The ANC were operating almost as a guerrilla underground movement, whereas there wasn't that vehicle in places like Chile to do it, so they had no choice but to get out.

JD: Do you believe that other, say, because of this lack of people who came over from South Africa to the UK, do you believe that may have hindered the Movement a little bit?

DB: Well, it's always better if people are speaking for themselves rather than being spoken for. It's always better if people are telling their own story. It's always better if that can, now don't misunderstand me, that the anti-apartheid campaign were very good at getting high-profile theatre and film directors and people with importance in the arts world to be able to portray what was happening quite vividly, so the world was getting to know what was happening. The Soweto massacre and things of that nature couldn't be hidden and that was the really powerful message that was coming. People were horrified and appalled at the same time, in South Africa as you saw with Nelson Mandela, but with those around him they sometimes knew that they had to be prominent victims to get that message across both to their own people, that they were prepared to stand up to the regime, they were prepared to put their own life and wellbeing and liberty on the line, and above all to demonstrate that for the international community. And that's what they were doing, they were standing up and defending themselves in court, rather than disappearing. Some people were told to disappear in order to bring out the messages and to have a voice outside, but others had chosen to stand up and, if you like, to be the symbol of resistance, and that's why the anti-apartheid struggle inside South Africa is so amazing. Because that's what people were, they were doing that in order to facilitate the pressure and the campaigning outside so that they couldn't be ignored. The messages were getting out. The propaganda of the South African government was being countered, which is very important, because the regime was very good at propaganda, they spent a lot of money and time buying the newspaper and broadcast coverage that they wanted, and smoozing and facilitating the wellbeing of prominent people who they wanted to speak on their behalf. They were very good at it. And they were very good at operating their secret police.

SP: When do you believe the media portrayal changed within Britain, what do you think the fact of the ...

DB: Well, again I don't think you should underestimate economic change. It became clear I think to people in the business community that what was happening was not sustainable in South Africa, so their business and economic interests were going to be at risk, in mining and other activity, and once they got that message then they were desperate to promote more rational voices. De Klerk who, remember, got the peace prize along with Nelson Mandela, although the anti-apartheid struggle and the ANC and what Mandela stood for was the driving force, I think, having had conversations with Nelson Mandela and recently I met de Klerk, who was at the House of Commons and recognised me, the fact that he was prepared to grasp that South Africa couldn't carry on with this any longer was important because it provided the international community with a political get-out clause. They'd found somebody in de Klerk who was prepared to do business with Nelson Mandela and that gave them a get-out. I think that was important, that was the moment when everybody realised, except the fanatical in South Africa, that the game was up.