

# 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nelson Mandela's release

To mark the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Nelson Mandela's release from prison this February Action for Southern Africa has collated the memories of some of the key activists involved in campaigning for his release and that of other political prisoners in southern Africa.

For more information please visit [www.actsa.org](http://www.actsa.org)

## What Nelson Mandela means to me

"Principled, inspiring, dignified, charismatic, heroic" are just some of the words which come to mind when one thinks of Nelson Mandela. And, they are all true.

I spent a weekend with Madiba as coordinator of his visit to Glasgow to collect the Freedoms of nine UK cities in 1993. He lived up to the legend he had become during his 27 plus years in prison. He moved seamlessly from one event to another, engaging in one-to-one dialogue, small group conversations and communicating with huge crowds: he inspired everyone throughout. He has this effect everywhere.

What has made him a world icon?

African culture came from consensus, and consensus comes from listening to people and respecting them. Imperialism, colonialism and apartheid tried to destroy African culture. Nelson Mandela's beliefs, attitudes, personality and character are a product of this background and his life of struggle. It is as a result of the lengthy Treason Trial, the mass campaigns against the Pass Laws, the armed struggle, his final arrest and prison years that Mandela developed into such an outstanding leader.

He became the first among the group of exceptional South African leaders, which included Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu and Govan Mbeki.

It is this background and life of principled struggle which has allowed Nelson Mandela to re-found his country thus becoming a beacon throughout the world for all those, especially young people, opposing racism and exploitation and striving for a better and peaceful life.

## Brian Filling

*Brian Filling was Chair of Scotland Anti Apartheid Movement in February 1990.*

*He is now Chair of ACTSA Scotland, ACTSA NEC member and South Africa's honorary consul in Scotland*

## **My memories of Mandela**

With the State Prosecutor calling for the death penalty and the White press baying for his blood, Nelson Mandela's closing remarks at the end of the Rivoni trial in 1964 were:

“During my lifetime, I have dedicated myself to the struggle of the African People. I have fought against White domination, and I have fought against Black domination, I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live in harmony and with equal opportunities. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be, it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die”.

These dignified and iconic words made a deep impression on me were to be the inspiration for all Anti-Apartheid Movements and activists the world over.

In the 20 years since his release, his spirit of reconciliation and lack of bitterness against the oppressors has been an example everyone. His wisdom has led all South Africans to live in peace and continue to live in peace for generations.

The ideals he has espoused have been and continued to be a beacon of hope to all oppressed people, that justice and freedom **will** prevail when pursued with vigour, integrity, dignity and honour.

It has been my privilege to have known him.

### **Bob Hughes**

*Lord Robert Hughes of Woodside was Chair of the Anti-Apartheid Movement from 1976-1990. He is now Honorary President of Action for Southern Africa.*

## **It always seems impossible.....**

Having worked on the Nelson Mandela – Freedom at 70 campaign at the Anti-Apartheid Movement, doing the press and publicity for it, I became deeply involved in his life, talking to journalists, persuading them to understand the symbolism of the man for the wider struggle. I began to worry that when (if was no longer an option) he was released, the world's huge hunger for a visionary leader, would be too much for one person, specially one that had been through what he already had. I was both joyful and nervous as the end of apartheid finally approached.

The day that Mandela walked free I remember being awash with emotions, willing him to be everything I and others had wanted him to be. And he was! And more. He is that someone rare and special, a leader who has everything, high principles, humility, intelligence, fierce energy, enormous charm and charisma. He was also so human, with his insistence on wearing fabulous shirts, his likelihood to break into dance at any moment, his genuine smile. On his arrival in Britain I was a volunteer steward outside his hotel, keeping the welcoming crowd from swamping him, and so I had a fabulous view as he emerged from the hotel, and took a sneaky photo on an old camera, I treasure that photo and it sits near my work computer.

Meeting Madiba for the first time was bittersweet. He was visiting London in May 1993, shortly after the race hate crime that killed Stephen Lawrence. The family were frustrated in their attempts to get this crime dealt with effectively, and their friends approached me and others to ask Mandela if he would meet with Doreen and Neville Lawrence. Despite his crazy schedule, when he found out about the request he made time to meet with the Lawrences, and that is when I met him. I realised that while I was meeting someone I seemed to have spent all my life wanting to be near, there was something much bigger and more important than me and what I wanted going on in that room. Grieving parents were fighting to make their voices heard, struggling to understand why anyone could possibly have a reason to have killed their child. Stephen had

been killed only two weeks earlier, and my job, which had been to help to make the meeting happen, was over, my part now was to stand aside. I learned something more about Madiba that day, he had a quiet, respectful quality, listening gravely to the mother and father, giving them time and space, encouraging them to tell him more, saying little, offering his witness to what they were experiencing. That meeting put the murder on an international stage, and followed with the continued and indomitable efforts of the Lawrences, changed the way in which we tackle racism here.

Someone asked me recently what I wanted for Mandela now. I want his dream of a “rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world” to become a reality. South and southern Africa struggles to overcome the many legacies that apartheid has left, the scars run deep and the region's people are understandably impatient for change to come even more quickly than it already has. South Africa has entered the world stage as a real player, but it also has an important role in the region and the continent. While global machinations continue to drain the resources of the poorer nations to clothe, feed and mechanise the richer, under the banner ‘free trade’, while we continue to expect to pay dirt cheap prices for things that have been made at the expense of someone else's quality of life, while we expect other's to bear the brunt of climate change that we in the West have contributed to in the main, I worry about the dream not just for South Africa, but for all of us.

Then I remember something Mandela said: “It always seems impossible until it's done.”

### **Chitra Karve**

*Chitra Karve is vice chair of ACTSA and worked at the Anti Apartheid Movement in February 1990.*

## **The greatest hero of the age**

Nelson Mandela and his comrades inspired us as young anti-racists because of the courage and dignity they showed when they were unjustly sentenced to life imprisonment by the Apartheid State in 1962. In the following years they provided a unique focus for protest and action because they graphically epitomised the need to strive against bigotry and tyranny everywhere.

As anti-Apartheid activists for nearly 30 years, we knew of Mandela's bravery and fortitude in the prisons of South Africa. But even that did not prepare us for the astounding tolerance and wisdom and leadership which he showed when he was freed and as he took South Africa to democracy.

All that, together with his gracefulness, toughness and unifying strength as President, and his ability to energise global campaigns for care, opportunity, liberty and justice, make Mandela unequalled. He is the greatest hero of the age.

No young person should ever have to confront and defeat the cruelty and oppression that Nelson Mandela and his people knew. But nothing should prevent anyone, young or old, from applying his liberating values. Doing that offers the proven, practical way to make our planet a better place. And it is also the best way to express gratitude to our friend, our comrade, who is Madiba to the World.

### **Neil and Glenys Kinnock**

*Neil Kinnock was leader of the Labour Party when Mandela was released in 1990. He is now Baron Kinnock. Glenys Kinnock is currently Minister for Africa*

## **The greatness of Mandela**

During the 1980s, the Anti-Apartheid vigils and demonstrations outside the South African Embassy in Trafalgar Square in London, provided a continuous focus for global anti racism and liberation struggles. The incarceration of Nelson Mandela offered such campaigns a high profile and instantly-visible global figure, who was associated with the legitimate struggles to destroy the injustices and oppression meted out by state regimes such as in South Africa.

Such campaigns were also helped by meeting with iconic figures of the struggles such as Oliver Tambo, Winnie Mandela and Walter Sisulu, when they were in London. They were able to provide a vivid picture of the sufferings and also the efforts to free Mandela.

One of the most moving experiences of my life was seeing Nelson Mandela during one of his first visits to England soon after his release, when he walked into the Birmingham Convention Centre. It was stunningly exhilarating and, for the first time in my life, I realised I was in the presence of "true greatness". When I met Nelson Mandela a few years later, his greatness was not just encapsulated in his history and legendary status, but the way he made everyone he met feel very special. That is a personal quality in our human characteristics that defines greatness among our leaders and decision makers. Mandela's leadership, experiences and track record of honourable actions have been underpinned by the highest ethical and moral standards, which is why he is revered as one of the truly great people of the world.

### **Herman Ouseley**

*Herman Ouseley was Chief Executive of the Inner London Education Authority in 1990. He was Chair and Chief Executive of the Commission for Racial Equality from 1993 to 2000. He is now Baron Ouseley and among other positions Chair of Kick it Out (Racism out of Football)*

## **Nelson Mandela is and remains the dominant political figure of our age.**

On his 1996 visit to the UK, I had the honour of accompanying President Mandela on a walkabout around Brixton. The reception was rapturous. Here was a man who had spent two decades in prison, yet he had an unparalleled grace and an ease in dealing with a community he didn't know, in a place he'd never seen. And he showed a wicked sense of fun, telling the crowd how pleased he was to be in Bristol. Actually, he knew perfectly well where he was but he was enjoying the freedom to tease his fans and to make ten thousand people laugh at themselves. And he showed that a secular saint need not be fashioned from plaster.

In my office, between snaps of Paul Robeson and the Windrush voyagers, a picture of the day has pride of place.

### **Trevor Phillips**

*Trevor Phillips is Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission*

## **“This chap”**

Nelson Mandela remains a unique inspiration to those of us who were actively involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement from the start in 1959. His trial and years of suffering on Robben Island were an outrage.

I recall in 1986 when as Leader of the Liberal party I was invited to give the annual freedom lecture at Cape Town University I was refused permission to visit Nelson Mandela. The then foreign minister Pik Botha asked me why we in the West were so obsessed by “this chap”.

“He has no experience of government. He’s hardly made a speech nor held a press conference”. He must have noticed my jaw dropping for he added – “of course it’s not entirely his fault”!!

It was therefore a great privilege to meet him after his release on his first visit to Parliament in London. But most of all he has set the world a glorious example of magnanimity and reconciliation which so many others in power in other countries would do well to follow.

### **David Steel**

*David Steel was President of the Anti-Apartheid Movement 1966-69. He was an MP from 1962-1997 and is Baron Steel of Aikwood.*