

## **Nelson Mandela's Release – A Personal Reminiscence**

On 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1990, President FW De Klerk went to the South African Parliament and announced the unbanning of the ANC and other political organisations. He also announced that Nelson Mandela, the only remaining Rivonia Trialist still in prison, would be released on Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> February 1990.

I was with ANC comrades in London when this was all announced. We were incredulous. Lawson Naidoo, the Secretary of the Regional Political Committee (RPG), asked what the unbanning of Umkhonto we Sizwe, the armed wing of the ANC, actually meant. We did not know. The Rev. Jenny Sweet said "I have been praying and working for this moment all my life. But we are not ready. We need more time." She was right. There was not much time to plan anything.

There was no doubt about where we were going to be. We would be outside the apartheid embassy in Trafalgar Square, which we had been picketing regularly since the Sharpeville Massacre on 21<sup>st</sup> March 1960. We had been there for the Rivonia Trial when Nelson Mandela and the others had been sentenced to life imprisonment. We had been there for the Soweto Massacre on 16<sup>th</sup> June 1976. We had been there for the hangings of Solomon Mahlangu, Benjamin Moloise and countless others. There was no question that we were going to be there on the day that Nelson Mandela walked free.

So, it was agreed that we would start assembling from midday on 11<sup>th</sup> February. As one of the organisers of the London Anti-Apartheid Committee, I was tasked with contacting the 30 local groups in London to tell them what the plans were for the day. The local groups did not have faxes, let alone email and this was all done by telephone. Others were contacting trade unions, religious bodies, women's organisations and other campaigning groups. The word was got out over the weekend of 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> February, and spread across London and elsewhere throughout the week. There were celebrations being organised across the whole country – Glasgow, Cardiff, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Sheffield.

I sat in the offices of the Anti-Apartheid Movement typing up a list of all the honours that had been accorded to Nelson Mandela from the naming of the Mandela Particle by Leeds University, to Glasgow being the first city in the world to make Nelson Mandela a freeman while he was still in prison, to Camden renaming the street containing the offices of the Anti-Apartheid Movement Mandela Street, and all the countless other places, organisations and people in the UK that honoured Mandela in some way. That list is now in the Anti-Apartheid Archive at the Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Then the day arrived. I thought very carefully about what to wear that day. It was cold but dry. I wore my Nelson Mandela Freedom March tee-shirt. The Freedom Marchers celebrated Nelson Mandela's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday by marching from Glasgow to London to demand his release. I joined them at Macclesfield, about half way through. I had not worn the tee-shirt since Mandela's 70<sup>th</sup>

birthday on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1988. I still had a clean one, washed, ironed and starched by Patsy Pillay, so that when we appeared on the TV cameras of the world, we were a credit to Nelson Mandela and the Anti-Apartheid Movement. It was that tee-shirt that I took out of its cellophane wrapper and wore that day, 30 years ago.

When I arrived in Trafalgar Square at about midday, we were filling the pavement directly outside the embassy. This was the pavement that the Thatcher Government had attempted to stop us using because they held that it contravened its dignity. We had refused to accept that the apartheid embassy had any dignity and arranged celebrity pickets with people like Neil Kinnock, the leader of the opposition, Dame Peggy Ashcroft, Joanna Lumley and a host of others, challenging them to arrest us. The government back down. It was on that pavement that I met two other Nelson Mandela Freedom Marchers, Vijay Krishnarayan and Peter Shield. The pavement was getting crowded so we decided to take the street. It was Vijay, I think, who bellowed "Amandla!" and Peter and I replied "Awethu!" and the crowd followed us into the road. The police had obviously been prepared for this, and diverted the traffic. Then the ANC choir began to sing, and to dance the toyi-toyi. We made our way over to join them.

Sandile Vilakazi, one of the ANC office staff, saw me, hoisted me off my feet and swung me round. Sandile was one of the first to go back to South Africa, to Cape Town. He was assassinated soon after his arrival. I never saw him again. Sandile was one of the 10,000 people murdered by apartheid agents between the release of Mandela and his inauguration as President.

There was one thing that went wrong that day. The TV screens failed to work. So, we did not actually see the iconic footage of Mandela walking out of Victor Verster Prison hand in hand with Winnie Mandela. At least, we did not see it until we got home and watched on our TV screens. But that was to be quite late at night. I ended up on the platform chairing the speakers who were addressing the crowd. I tried to assemble those who were on the picket line at the start of the Rivonia Trial, or at least as many of them as I could see. Then Mel Milbourne, an ANC comrade, asked me if I would like Diane Abbott to say a few words. Diane was one of the first black MPs in Parliament, (the other three being Bernie Grant, Paul Boateng and Keith Vaz) and of course I said yes. She was electrifying. She was clear that Nelson Mandela was being released to lead his people to freedom and that, in the words of the song, it would be "a heavy task, a heavy task and it will need some real strength".

It was a remarkable day. It would be another four years before we actually set foot in the South African Embassy. On that day, 10<sup>th</sup> May 1994, Nelson Mandela was inaugurated as the first democratically elected President of South Africa. We had won.

#### **Reference:**

David Kenvyn, 2020