

Interview: Raymond Suttner

Q ...in the sense of um, he did not expect to be caught and all that and he had a different sort of background politically. He wasn't really underground in the sense that we were underground. So there was a difference.

Q Ok, maybe..did you get a sense even with Matthew...with Jenkin and Lee with A, how much later with....

A Sorry, how much

Q When did you come in, what year?

A 1978. Ja, Jenkin and Lee, there wasn't such a big..there was a fair age gap but it wasn't...there were differences in the way that they had been trained and all that, I thought; or the way they conducted themselves, but basically there wasn't such a big difference. I mean there was a bigger difference between, much bigger difference, between Refrew Christie and myself say, just in the background politically.

Q Ok, Goldberg, was he not kept separately, I thought he was kept...

A NO, he was with us.

Q And um, do you want to say anything about inside and that. I mean what was it like when...to hear about that now?

A Look here I don't think that anyone has got the right to condemn someone who has done 20 years. Nothing gets rubbed out by that. I think it is unfortunate however, that he should have broken ranks. But I think that there was a...this was in process, in progress these negotiations, even before and I think that we must...that the person is honest and he says I did not have the strength to go further. Now if you work underground for instance, if someone says I haven't got the strength to go in again, to work underground, they would never force them to and I think it is analogous to this. I mean it is unfortunate in the objective sense, but that its a white who does it and all that; that is very unfortunate but I think one must understand the person felt he just couldn't carry on and he was in isola...not in isolation, but he was in relatively isolated compared to the other Rivonia people.

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Q Oh c.....other blacks.

A Because there were lots of people round giving him support. When I came in he said do you think you will serve your whole sentence? I said yes and that was sort of upsetting for him coz he was hoping I would say no, with a view to him coming out. You see I had like a different interest. I had to reconcile myself to serving all; whereas he had to hope that some day we will all be free, which I think is true. So that's

Q Didn't he have Kitson a bit?

A Well, Kitson has^s left you see, (I know) but he wouldn't have someone permanently on life, you know, that is what I mean. Like the guys on the Island.

Q Ja, but were they close in those 20years they were together?

A Were they close? (Ja) Ja, I think you should ask them; their relationship you know.

Q Ok and is it true that 18 others have signed this...(Idon't know)

A The press says Rob Allen and Renfrew have signed but I don't know.

Q And you don't want to say anything about...

A No, I wouldn't like to, comment.

Q And about the escape?

A I wouldn't like to comment. Des has actually said something about it but I wouldn't like to comment. I don't really know what happened.

Q Ok, can you...just to getting it to them getting to the 80s and that is it finishing; just the getting out and experiencing anything. Had you been thinking this is what I am going to do when I get out or personally and politically?

A Well, I have thought of leaving you know. But because I imagined being banned and so forth and that would not be very effective and all that and maybe...I don't want to give them the suggestion 100

A that they should ban me so I shouldn't say that but, the situation has changed a fair amount and possibilities for leading a fairly human existence and politically interesting existence, effective existence is now available as a result of the very important struggles that other people have waged. The state has had to try and give the illusion of, ~~more~~ space for democratic activity; well not illusions, in reality as well. And I am one of the beneficiaries because I am not banned or anything.

I got a job very soon which was very nice and had an academic job ever since then.

Q You felt that there's limitations on you as an ex political prisoner?

A Well in some senses, not limitations; in some senses you are treated like a celebrity. I don't know if it is because I was in jail but I was invited as a visiting lecturer only ~~one~~ or twice before I went to jail but since I have come out of jail I seem to be continuously visiting lecturer at just about every university, including Stellenbosch. So maybe...it has been a great advantage, I am not sure.

Q You..did you speak at Stellenbosch?

A I have been...did a whole lot of lectures there; Stellenbosch, Rhodes, Wits, UCT, Durban. So in that sense it is not a problem but I think that the limits of tolerance, there might be a limit on tolerance which I may one day penetrate, I don't know. Certainly the Minister, might, or the police might decide not to tolerate my UDF activities or something. All I know is that I operate perfectly legally and if they do act people should know that they have acted against someone who is acted legally and they are acting because they support democratic beliefs, not because I have done anything illegal, even under S.A. Laws.

Q And what exact month did you people come out?

A May 1983, two years ago.

Q So you got out and two months later the UDF was lauded ?

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A immediately. In fact I am not being too eager to stand for UDF and in any case I was not really so anxious to get this great honour on being on the Transvaal UDF (Executive?) Ja.

I think what my first mistake was when I gave that TB Davey lecture, because ever since then I have had to speak all over the place.

Q Which lecture was this?

A That one, that Freedom Charter lecture I gave last year.

Q What is it called again?

A TB Davey Memorial Lecture. DAVIE.

Q And that is at UCT?

A MMM, last September.

Q Is that like the Freedom one at Wits?

A Ja, that is it. That sort of thing, yes. Jeremy did the Freedom one here. I did the one there.

Q Ja.

A Ever since then it's just been impossible.

Q What month was given....

A September; I'll show you, it is just here.

Q September? (1984). So was that the kind of you breaking out or had you been speaking on it before?

A Well, a little bit but I didn't really...I spoke at NUSAS Congress, but I spoke more on professional field, like political trials or... but I hadn't done a lot. But once I did this talk it was impossible to avoid talking...doing other talks and I was sort of billed as Freedom Charter expert and now, what I am not trying to do, now that I have got this other job, is, and it is not only to get the load off myself, but I am an education officer now in UDF and I am trying to

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A I am trying to ensure that other people will be able to do this as well, and quite a few other people are now doing it/giving these talks.

Q So you are Education Officer and on the Transvaal Exec?

A Well that is my position on the Transvaal Exec. Education Officer.

Q And when you came out did you just...was the public debate very, very different from when you went in?

A Yes, well you see there wasn't a UDF; there wasn't a presence of a legal democratic movement in the country and...let me think, the debate was very different because there...was not this sort of debate at all. If you advocated the Charter in the 70s you would have been banned and ^{most} people who advocated were in jail. So it is a completely different situation.

But I am mainly engaged in it on an academic level, at first, you know.

Q And did it seem...were you quite aware of the BC and the lack of non racialism before and a kind of non racial feeling afterwards?

A Well, when I went to jail BC was quite strong. But I was aware of this before I came out of jail because we were getting newspapers for about two or there years. I just wasn't used to open democratic activities - I find I still continue to whisper things to people. Telephone.

Q You talked about tracing non racialism historically and turning of the white intelligensia to the labour movement, at a certain point; now why did you miss that? Why did you choose to get into Law? Did you ever think at a certain point, as more whites seemed to think, you gotta ^{deal with} the black masses and organise them as workers.

A Turn to Law?

Q Ja, why didn't you go to law? Did you not think of going to unions or something like that/like so many whites did?

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A a problem..was a disadvantage; that I had actually chosen a very boring and limiting profession and all that sort of thing; I still tend to think, so but its not going to answer you directly; but in prison I managed..people used to encourage me to actually work in law and I actually started to read more progressive lawyers than I had read previously and I started to see that it is too late for me to become a nuclear physicist or something, in the autumn period of my life; I must stick to law and work in that way.

But this business..of the labour, of going into labour, I was already underground so I couldn't really think of entertaining that sort of thing. So it was not a choice between law and that, it was a choice between underground and over ground activities which I felt would endanger my position.

Q And what, when you came out, it seems you just, was it from when you came out that you started to focus on the Freedom Charter?

A No, no, I was invited to do this talk; it was about the 3rd choice; what happened was they invited (us[?] to) Stuart Hall; I got a phone call from Jeremy and he said look here, I have been asked to phone you to sound you out; they invited Stuart Hall to give this TB Davie lecture and he has refused for reasons that you would approve of, so I knew he meant the academic boycott; now they are scraping the barrel he said, and they asked him but he thought that I was better. Now I actually didn't think I was better but I didn't want to argue over the phone about this and I said I would think about it. He said he thought it was an occasion where I could make quite an important theoretical intervention; so we hadn't even then really talked, but I understood him to mean to bring something on the Charter again, coz nothing had really been done. And when I saw...it was quite interesting, although we don't see one another we seem to analyse the situation similarly; so I then went to on and spoke to my consultative people and I thought was a good idea. Because it is an very important occassion, in the terms that they publish the text and all that.

So then, I had never worked on it before; well I set about doing this talk to 100s of people about it; young people mainly at that stage.

I wasn't gathering ideas like for this book; I talked to young people and people in general about what problems they had with the Charter.

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A I spoke to a lot of the workerists actually because I wanted to answer every problem. I talked to people like Phil Bonner, BC people like Saths Cooper, and I wanted to deal with the heaviest arguments against the Charter and refute them or find them to be justified. I was prepared to, I mean I do feel that the Charter has a problem, minor problems; and then what was very useful to me was that I had a long interview with Billy Nair which I took all my problems; and when I went down to speak at NUSAS Congress I had an interview with him and I put actually heavy questions to him but poor guy, he has so much material, information and ideas, stored up in him, the thing is you just have to extract it ruthlessly.

I kept on asking him the questions and that was the turning point and then basically I improved and improved it.

Q Was it you who chose the topic of the Charter?

A Yes .

Q And when Cronin phoned you did he say do the charter?

A I knew he meant..no, no. He said, to me, it would be a good occasion for a theoretical intervention and I thought he thought, what I thought, was that its the time for this. And when I spoke to him that is what he had thought.

Q Aha. And what kind of response did you get to the paper?

A Well, more than a sort of clapping. I was more concerned about the published version because it was...the published thing is longest one they have ever had because I did only deliver about half of that. I was concerned with its effect afterwards and you know it was distributed very widely. I mean that night there were copies in Worster and Paarl and Beaufort West and things like this and they had reprints and it went...very widely distributed and photocopied and what have you and that is why, I think they banned it, you see.

Q Did it...is it banned?



Well, it has been banned..but the ban has been suspended till an appeal is heard. I think it will be unbanned actually coz of 304

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A a prestigious academic occasion. It is..I tried to do it in quite a scholarly way but people..it was the first substantial defence of the Charter. I think some of the parts are not correct, in the way I formulated it but I didn't have such a lot of time. I mean people think four months is a long time but it is actually a little time for such a big thing.

Q And you use this euphemism, it needs to be discussed, what were you saying? That there's debates about these criticisms and you feel like you really feel it is important ...

A I say this in the talk you mean?

Q Ja, you said that it needs to be discussed.

A Well, you see there is a religious attitude to the Charter; the Charter, anyone who attacks it is an enemy that sort of thing. Anyone who has problems is an enemy and people treat it as a sort of ..it is an article of faith to support the Charter and why is never really debated. The problems are never debated or were never; there is a lot more debate this year coz the 30th Anniversary but I wanted to open it because I felt you can't defend it in that sort of arrogant way. And we have got to engage people, we have got to discuss it; in our own ranks there are problems, people have different views. You can't, ^{mount} ~~not~~ it as a successful challenge to a state unless you have political cohesion ^{sign} and we don't have political cohesion.

So we have to establish it amongst ourselves before we can defend it properly. I didn't approve of some of the reactions that some people had to the AZAPO, or the national forum manifesto. I think it is important to be constructive to other peoples things and indicate that there is..the Charter is a distinct unique document for reasons of its creation as well as its formulations but I think we have got to be prepared to discuss other peoples' positions.

Q You said the struggle for non racialism is crucially linked to the development of ^{activating} leadership in the development of the working?

A No I didn't quite put it that way. (Probably not) No you see I said that non racialism is not incompatible with African leadership.

You see in the context of S.A., because the most oppressed section

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A of the population is the African majority; the people who have been denied all rights, and are the most nationally oppressed section. To right this wrong, to actually liberate S.A. it means in the first place the creation of an African state. A state with an African majority character and if we want to ensure this we have got to ensure African leadership.

Now before going into working class leaderships people say, well how can you have African leaderships and non racialism. You know, it is a bit of a formalistic attitude to non racialism because in the context of S.A. you, to operate on the formal base of non racialism can be a guise for not correcting a situation, where S.A. is like a European outpost, to turn it into an African country means its culture must be predominantly an African culture. We must be immersed in the S.A. reality and to do that its got to be an African say an African lead state.

It is like in the debates in the...between Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin and these things; the argument taken in those days was that those people who supported self determination said for the people in the oppressor nation, that is us the whites, to promote self determination of the people in the oppressed nation, oppressed peoples. And in this situation whites must really propagate African leadership. Once that is established, when there is room for generosity in the sense of obviously there are many whites, like Bram Fisher, who have been heroes of the struggle in general, but it must be a primarily African state because that reflects its real composition; it is only because of cultural oppression that Africans have not been able to take their proper place in the state.

Now that is tied to working class leadership because as I say that most Africans are workers, most workers are Africans and they are denied these skills which would enable them to take the leadership. Now we have to take much more substantial steps to ensure that and our jobs as educational officers is one of the ways of achieving this, providing the skills and so forth.

Q Do you think that whites...do more debating than blacks in terms of ..on an intellectual level, I mean this whole Charterist/workerist but that anti popular front ideas, do you think that whites do a lot more (agonising) than blacks do and why would that be?

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A Ja, no I think probably in general but I think it is intellectuals, whether white or black who do a lot more debating. But then most intellectuals are whites.

Q And what about the whole role of liberals; let me just ask about it in a better context because I just don't want to have this I would like to relate it to you. (? no, carry on) Just in terms of when your involvement before and then coming out of prison, I mean in the 70s would one have talked about embracing liberals in the way it is talked about now. Is that part of the new era kind of thing?

Q Well, it is not talked about now; I mean in general people don't embrace liberals.

Q What do they do?

A No, well there is a certain contempt for liberals but I don't think that liberals are a substantial grouping. Liberals at the moment are in... can be found in the PFP, in groups like the Institute of Race Relations and in some sections of the university and I mean there is some debate in UDF, in the white democratic circles as to whether one can win these people over, and whether one should try to. Now, I ^{have} feel quite strongly ~~that~~ that one should, win the people over from the Progs and so forth, but it is not a major factor, or a major tendency in the UDF. But I believe it is correct.

JODAC believe that is correct. That is, Joberg Democratic Action Committee. And the UDF people in P.E. have ~~some~~ wonders in that regard.

Q Are you in JODAC?

A I am a member, yes.

Q It seems that there is an encouragement, there is not that kind of contempt that there was years ago.

A There ~~still~~ is, no, no still is. No I think it depends you see; some people, I don't feel it at the moment. I think that it is a contempt that intellectuals feel.. You know intellectuals Marxists

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A can afford to show contempt for people who have not had the insights that they had, feel they have had. But I think if you are in politics seriously you have to realise that not everyone who is not a Marxist is...worthy of scorn. A lot of people are actually very honest, particularly church people are..and have been very principled and have made a very substantial contribution to liberation in S.A.

I am quite prepared to work with liberals, not just mean the PFP in a formal sense, maybe at some stage we could do some work with them, I don't know, but liberals, christians etc. but it is not everyones idea ~~axxx~~lot of people at university have got a contemptuous attitude

q Can..do..you..perhaps you could say something about Jewish activists and I don't know exactly how to ask the question, but historically and (What's significance..) Ja.

A I don't know what...I mean there is always a high representation of Jewish people in the struggle. I think it has probably got something to do with the reaction to Nazi racism and stuff like that. I think it influenced me in that I felt ^{that if} I was opposed to anti Semitism I should be opposed to other forms of racism but I mean ^{there are} a number of tendencies; most Jewish groupings are, in S.A., very reactionary, or ~~exx~~ they combine anti apartheid attitudes with pro Zionist attitudes. Now, I would not like this attitude to be in a printed interview, but I am not pro Zionist. I mean I don't think the democratic movement is pro Zionist although I don't feel that in the context of S.A. it is a major issue for me to take up; to assert my anti Zionist position; it is just not useful at the precise moment, although I am. I am pro the Palestinian struggle for self determination - completely support it and I oppose Israeli aggression in the Middle East. At

But so I think the Jewish population is composed of a variety of tendencies; I am not quite sure what, I haven't done a careful study of what would motivate them for their very high representation amongst political jews and so forth.

How many more questions?

q Not many? So you, Cronin and Rankin never...(Cronin is not Jewish) I thought he was. (He is Catholic)background) Ok so the only

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Q questions I have now, are just general white questions. Questions about the white ~~role~~, general questions about the struggle. Do you think that S.A. will be ultimately, when it changes, different than other colonial situations have been in Southern Africa, Algeria, other places?

A Um, can't guarantee anything and if the Freedom Charter is implemented it will be a very much more substantial social transformation that has occurred and has occurred in most states of Africa. It also depends on a variety of other factors; where the working class leadership is realised, how it is realised; whether other groupings are reconciled to transition to socialism and so forth. ~~There is~~ ^{is} also ~~(xxxxxxxxxx)~~ depends on the nature of the transformation - if we have a situation like in Iran, where you just kick the Shah out and take over completely, well then you can do what you like. But in Zimbabwe for example, they negotiated Lancaster House and in the ~~negotia-~~ ^{negotia-} tion situation you can't take over completely. Now maybe we'll have to go into negotiation situation, I just don't know; it is impossible to...and if you go into that, it is more difficult but some people say you carry on struggling, well then you'll have complete victory.

People get tired sometimes and they cannot continue struggling. I mean the sort of repression that has been maintained in the communities at the moment, it is not breaking their spirit but as a permanent phenomenon people would not continue struggling. Or might not against this permanent repression. I mean they are virtually wiping out whole segments of communities at the moment. This violence that is going on ⁱⁿ the townships' is occupying them like foreign armies.

So I don't know really, I can't forecast that. I do believe it will be..we have got the most mature democratic movement on the continent.

A And one thing I am really interested in seeing ^{what} you say ^{is} this whole thing of the lessons of the 50s and it is used in a lot of different ways just depending on your point of view; from your point of view what are these lessons? I mean, there are a lot of parallels; JODAC and COD, the way the ANC Million Signature Campaign and UDF I mean there are lots of analogies; So what are the lessons, how is it all going to be ~~different~~ different? The 50s didn't turn out all that well?

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A I don't sort of see us as reproducing the 50s. I think that we have like a baton has been dropped temporarily and we picked it up again under different conditions. The baton is a baton in the sense of cross class alliances, the broadest based national alliance against apartheid oppression and exploitation; we have tried, like the Congress Alliance did, we are trying to isolate the racist regime and to draw in all anti apartheid forces to oppose them and in a sense that ~~has~~^{has} shown that the...we in a sense believe that the approach adopted then is valid today.

But I don't sit around and think what are the lessons of the 50s all the time. I am not...I think a lot of people are obsessed with it in the union movement, in the sense that they think SACTU was wiped out you see and that is one of the lessons of the 50s. I am not quite sure what ~~the~~ others; maybe meaning, I think, to get very strongly based organisations; maybe theirs weren't sufficiently...I find that hard to believe because I think that Congress movement was very firmly based. So I don't...I am not...it is not a thing that I say a lot, you know, lessons of the 50s. I have never really pulled that out a lot.

Q Why do you feel that...do you feel more hopeful? I mean why should one feel more hopeful?


A About today?

Q Ja, I mean if you look there are certain parallels, and why, I think that this time its....

A You can do what?

Q Turn out better or whatever, you know.

A No, you can't guarantee this but um, I never thought that we are going to be free tomorrow or anything like this but I believe that the only way to free S.A. is to consolidate an alliance of all ~~the~~^{pe}ople opposed to apartheid. Now we are building that again. We are at the very early stages of building. We have mobilised millions of people but they are not yet adequately organised. Now we are

 trying to do that. Now I am hopeful because we are on the right track ~~xxxxx~~I believe. The UDF is moving into a new ~~phase~~^{phase}, what they call it, from protest to challenge, from mobilisation to orga

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A organisation. What we mean by this is taking it to a higher level where people are not just coming out spontaneously but organised. We have not achieved that yet so one can't speak of being hopeful or not hopeful.

The state is in a terrible crisis at the moment. It doesn't know what to do and its...it can't win consent for its constitution so it is trying to ram it down their throats physically. Now in this circumstance the state seems to be bankrupt but we haven't yet achieved sufficiently cohesive, ~~co~~ordinated modes of struggle to take adequate advantage of this. Whether we will, I think we will, or hope we will, depends on a number of factors.

Like they are trying to knock off our leadership. Maybe I won't be around next time you come to interview people. I mean...they haven't started to knock off Transvaal leadership but national leadership they have been knocking off. So if they knock off all our leadership then we have problems. But we will overcome it I think.

Q You mean detention/intervention...

A Ja, that kind of thing.

Q Ok, this will be my last question. Is this thesis valid; are you at all interested in looking at the role of whites, historically? Do you think it's important, and why would it be?

A You see, ja, I don't...I think it is important but I hadn't really thought of the whole history; I am preoccupied to some extent with their role and that now, that I think is very important because the struggle against apartheid is not only a struggle between blacks and whites it is also a struggle to exacerbate problems within the white ruling alliance. They are facing real problems; they are having revolts within their ranks, from outside their ranks and maize farmers, business people and what have you.

And organisations like JODAC, End Conscription Campaign and various others cause extra problems ^{for them} and that is part of the process of making it difficult for ~~them~~ and anything that makes it difficult for apartheid to continue I think is good and whites ^{who} have been in

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A the democratic movement have always contributed in that way.

It is not only people in the democratic movement believe that sometimes there are...I mean it would be very silly for one to write off the role of liberals who have been out of...outside the democratic movement; someone like Helen Susman has played quite an important role~~m~~ although I don't agree with a lot of what she has^s done. I think she's sometimes..and some of the Progs take ~~ka~~ more principled position towards our str^guggles or certainly someone like Molly Blackburn, MPC who is in the UDF; Di Bishop, people like that are very principled people, I think. From what I can see. I don't know them very well.

Obviously Helen Susman wouldn't go along with some things we do but we can't deny the utility of her consistently raising detentions and all that. It is very important.

Q Ok, we can stop. Thanks a lot.