

The Alan Paton Centre  
& Struggle Archives



## RECORDING THE ANTI-APARTHEID STRUGGLE IN KWAZULU-NATAL

Oral History Project of the Alan Paton Centre,  
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus

Interview with Dr Peter Brown  
conducted by Prof. Norman Bromberger  
in Pietermaritzburg  
on 31 August 1995

3<sup>rd</sup> interview in a series of 8

(Edited, corrected version)

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TAP 6 (3)

## 1 KWAZULU/NATAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

2

3 INTERVIEW WITH PETER BROWN, CONDUCTED BY NORMAN BROMBERGER ON 31.8.1995  
4 (THIRD SESSION), IN HILTON/PIETERMARITZBURG.

5

6 N: This is the third interview with Peter Brown conducted by  
7 Norman Bromberger and it's taking place on Thursday, the 31st  
8 of August, at Peter Brown's residence in Pietermaritzburg.9 N: Okay, Peter, at the end of the last tape we were talking  
10 about the Indian constituency, or the general Indian  
11 community in Natal, and the success or otherwise of the  
12 Liberal Party in the 50s and 60s in recruiting support  
13 amongst that community. We'd got to the point (although I  
14 don't think the question was quite fitted in before the tape  
15 ran out) of to what extent there were ideological factors  
16 behind the lack of headway - or the relative lack of headway,  
17 if that's more correct - which the Liberal Party made there.  
18 In particular, I'm interested in the influence of Marxism and  
19 of Communist Party sympathies in that community. Was that  
20 important?21 P: Yes. I'm sure it was. I would be surprised if  
22 Marxist/Communist Party support ran very deep in the Indian  
23 community, but certainly the young intellectuals and  
24 professionals, talked in a language showing Marxist  
25 influence. So, somebody like Poovalingam, whom we mentioned  
26 last time, I think he broke from the Indian Congress on that  
27 issue. On the whole, what success we had wasn't amongst the  
28 intellectuals. Another thing is that lower down the economic  
29 ladder, the Indian community were in a way trying to hang on  
30 to what they'd got - they weren't great confronters with the  
31 Nats, I don't think. Although of course it is undoubtedly  
32 true that over the Group Areas issue the Congress did get  
33 grassroots support. Returning to your question, certainly  
34 the ideological component was there; that was the line that  
35 was set by the vocal leadership of the NIC.

1 N: And would you say that, in some way which is not too easy to  
2 define, the leadership held the high ground, and that people  
3 less articulate and less perhaps educated and so on, while  
4 not necessarily agreeing with it, were reluctant to be  
5 visibly out of line with it?

6 P: Yes, Yes, I think that is so, I think so. I must also say  
7 that that, I think that attitude softened with the passage of  
8 time when we became more involved in the anti-Group Areas  
9 series of meetings and so on which they initiated, and people  
10 like Alan Paton, and Ken Hill in Durban, Les Kuper were very  
11 involved in that kind of thing.

12 N: When you say the attitude softened, you mean .....?

13 P: The hostility towards the Liberal party. And no doubt that  
14 softening came about partly from getting to know people  
15 better.

16 N: Yes. Could we pick up the question of Marxism and one of its  
17 political manifestations in our time, Communism of the Soviet  
18 variety? What I am really interested in is whether there  
19 were any stages at which the set of ideas, as represented by  
20 Marxists locally, attracted you, challenged you, worried you,  
21 or whether you were impervious to the pressures emanating  
22 from that source?

23 P: Well, I think I was impervious. Not as a result of any great  
24 intellectual rejection, but in a way it was something I'd  
25 never come close to. Certainly within the Party one became  
26 very aware of it, and I think not only because of the kind of  
27 language, a large part of the leadership of the Congresses  
28 used to use - I mean the old jargon. But also my impression  
29 certainly is that the Congress movement publicity arm, or  
30 whatever you like to call it, was undoubtedly in the hands of  
31 those kind of people, New Age and so on. I was talking to  
32 Randolph Vigne about this last night, and Magnus Gunther,  
33 who's researched New Age back editions, confirms it's all  
34 there, the unquestioning pro-Soviet, pro-Stalin stance.

35 N: Yes, that's right .....

1 P: And of course we used to get very irritated by the whole  
2 Bandung foreign policy line. You'd be at some broad-platform  
3 meeting which had nothing to do with international questions,  
4 and without any prior consultation sure enough Bandung and  
5 related questions would get pulled in.

6 N: And you would be required to take positions on them, kind of  
7 public resolutions and so on.

8 P: Well, I mean you were there on the platform with this being  
9 spouted, and one couldn't dissociate oneself from it without  
10 wrecking the whole purpose of what the meeting was supposed  
11 to be about. In a way, I suppose, we were quite fortunate in  
12 Natal in that the SACP influence was very weak in the ANC  
13 here. And the COD was a very small group in Natal anyway.

14 N: Ja. ja.

15 P: And, as I say, with the Indian Congress ..... relations  
16 changed over time. Alan for instance became a good - well,  
17 he was a very good - friend of old Monty Naicker who I'm sure  
18 was a member of the SACP, but they became good friends. And  
19 other leading figures like JM Singh and so on also became  
20 friends of Alan's - and Les Kuper had many friends, the Meers  
21 and people like that who were in the top ranks of the local  
22 Congress. So that, over time, softened what certainly  
23 started off at the first public meeting in Durban as a very  
24 hostile reception for the Party.

25 N: In practice, I suppose too, it would have been possible for  
26 Liberals to accept as a sort of fait accompli that the  
27 Congress was organising, and having some success in  
28 organising, Indian people in opposition to some of the same  
29 forces that the Party was opposing.

30 P: Yes.

31 N: And so you had a kind of de facto Congress Alliance. (Laughs)  
32 You in the role of an organisation with the initially  
33 majority White membership, and then, increasingly, of mixed  
34 membership. But at least you could see these people -  
35 provided particularly there were friendly relations at a

1 personal level - as engaged in doing constructive work?

2 P: Yes. It wasn't what they were doing, it was the language  
3 they tended to speak which was the problem.

4 N: Yes. Since we are with Marxism and Communism, let's shift a  
5 little to socialism and social-democratic and related ideas.  
6 I was a little surprised, in reading something, I can't  
7 remember quite where it was, in which you wrote that by the  
8 early 60s the Party had an economic policy which saw the need  
9 for some measure of land redistribution, capital taxation,  
10 and what quite surprised me in your mouth, or under your hand  
11 as it were, 'a planned mixed economy'. Now, I'm not wishing  
12 to be critical, I am just interested - given the prevailing  
13 ideas of the time - that the Party did move in that kind of  
14 direction. Was this for you, an evolution of ideas? When you  
15 began, let's say in '53, had you articulated thoughts about  
16 policy of that kind - or was this something that you grew  
17 into as the debate developed?

18 P: Yes, I certainly hadn't articulated any economic ideas - I  
19 don't think I had any. I don't know whether you've come to  
20 it in that 'Contemporary History' of the Liberal Party I  
21 wrote, but there was a move at one stage, probably about that  
22 time in the early 60s, to change the name of the Party to the  
23 Social Democratic Party, which was certainly put forward by  
24 Ernie Wentzel, although somebody said recently in fact it  
25 came from Leftwich, and the NUSAS wing of that time. The  
26 interesting thing, perhaps, was that there was no great  
27 opposition to that suggestion. The only person I can  
28 remember threatening to resign was Bill West in Cape Town,  
29 who was, I suppose, a fully-fledged free and uninhibited free  
30 marketer. But I can't actually remember what happened after  
31 that debate. That idea was never adopted, but whether it was  
32 put away to be talked about and discussed during the year  
33 following and then got overtaken by the events of the  
34 Nationalist attack on the Party, I don't know. But anyway,  
35 nothing happened. But it certainly, I suppose, indicates

1 that when people began to talk about economic policy it  
2 wasn't the free market that was at the top of the general  
3 agenda.

4 N: Yes. And when you said, what I quoted from memory a few  
5 minutes ago, you were not simply reporting what policy was,  
6 you had yourself, by and large, endorsed that, had you?

7 P: Yes, I think so, I think so. I don't remember saying that,  
8 but I think I probably did.

9 N: You would have thought about the land policy and agriculture  
10 in particular, I suppose?

11 P: Well, obviously one was confronted with this from within our  
12 own membership.

13 N: Yes. That seems a good point at which to ask some questions  
14 about the membership. I'm thinking, particularly about Natal  
15 - which you would have had direct experience of - although  
16 there is an echo to my question from the Transvaal. One way  
17 of getting into it is to say that I had a note sent to me by  
18 Joycelyn Leslie-Smith, and she's preparing some publicity  
19 about you for next week's meeting, and there was a reference  
20 there to your having supported the struggles of the  
21 'landless' from the 1950s. Now that struck me as not quite  
22 right, and that what the Party had done was to lend support  
23 to and find in return support from, precisely the small  
24 landed class of Africans, in this province in particular,  
25 because they were under threat, no doubt from many quarters,  
26 but in particular over the question of expropriation and  
27 relocation and so on - in loose terms, the Black Spot  
28 removals. And while I think there is one reference to the  
29 Alcock initiative in Underberg, where farm labourers were  
30 brought in to that branch, am I correct that, at least in the  
31 small towns and in the more rural districts in the northern  
32 parts of Natal, that African support very substantially came  
33 from the group of small landowners with modern tenure?

34 P: Yes. Not only from landowners, because of course all the  
35 Black Spots had a lot of, perhaps even a majority of tenants.

1 N: Yes.

2 P: And it was I suppose interesting that there didn't seem to be  
3 conflict between them in the opposition to the resettlement  
4 programme. Certainly, in our experience - we didn't find a  
5 divide in opposing being resettled. Farm workers, I agree,  
6 were. In a way, peripheral. But quite a lot of the tenants,  
7 were people who had been earlier moved off farms and taken  
8 refuge there. So there was a bit of that kind of contact -  
9 where people from outside the freehold area would come to  
10 meetings - and perhaps eventually join the Party. But, in  
11 general, it's right that it was the people in the freehold  
12 areas. And Joycelyn is wrong - it wasn't the question of  
13 landlessness, that was too remote really. What one was  
14 trying to do was to protect what was already in Black hands.

15 N: Right.

16 P: Perhaps I should add a little bit to that, Norman, just  
17 thinking about it - in particular your reference to Neil  
18 Alcock. I think, particularly - well it may not even have  
19 been particularly - but certainly it was the case in the  
20 Underberg/Himeville freehold areas that quite a lot of those  
21 people there were casual workers on surrounding farms. So to  
22 that extent, there was that kind of Party inroad into the  
23 farm worker community.

24 N: One of the things that occurred to me about that was, if you  
25 had a following or a membership of people who made their  
26 livelihood from farmwork alone, and whose whole horizon was  
27 bounded by farms, what would you be offering them?

28 P: Yes, well, one wasn't offering them anything except, I  
29 suppose, a new experience to come and get involved in talking  
30 to people of other races on the basis, more or less of  
31 equality for the first time. Also, perhaps something  
32 stimulating when there wasn't much stimulating, or apparently  
33 not much, in their lives. Here was a debate or something  
34 going on - that maybe was a bit of a draw, I don't know.

35 N: But the point you just made is that in addition to that,

1 these people, while making their livelihood as farmworkers  
2 did have, many of them, land.

3 P: Or, they might even have been tenants, but they had a base ,  
4 or had a 'farm'.

5 N: Ja, right. The only piece of African freehold, apart from  
6 Edendale, that I have any direct experience of, is the  
7 Cornfields one, and I don't have a very clear idea of that  
8 community, compared to other freehold communities. What I  
9 think I am trying to get at is whether this constituency,  
10 this group of people, who actually were organised in an  
11 association, which Mngadi got on its feet and called the  
12 Landowners' Association.

13 P: The Northern Natal African Landowners' Association - which  
14 was a misnomer because in fact tenants belonged to it too.

15 N: I see, I see. Aha, aha.

16 P: But the owners undoubtedly were the driving force behind the  
17 organisation.

18 N: It may sound in what follows as though I am trying to get at  
19 something critical again - which is not my intention. I have  
20 an image of Mngadi, his kind of military moustache, if I  
21 remember, and his tweed jacket and his well-polished shoes,  
22 the bearing and the accent. One felt he was a man of some  
23 sense of himself, a man of natural authority, but an  
24 authority which was also underwritten by the fact that he had  
25 had some substance - he had been a landowner - and a leader  
26 of the community, with an independence of some sort. I  
27 suppose what I am feeling for is how people saw themselves in  
28 an evolving South Africa, or a changing South Africa. Was  
29 there a defensive element there - that's to say perhaps like  
30 the Indian community we were talking about earlier on who  
31 wanted to hold on. Clearly they wanted to hold on, but did  
32 they, in some sense have a fear of 'deprived masses' who  
33 would overrun them as well? Or is that quite the wrong sort  
34 of picture?

35 P: Yes.

1 N: Ye? Meaning....?

2 P: I think it is a wrong picture. If I can go back to Mngadi for  
3 a moment. That image you presented of him: his father had  
4 been part of the syndicate which clubbed together to buy  
5 Roosboom. He went to the local Anglican Mission School. I  
6 don't know the history of that place, but it was a place  
7 called St Hilda's - which was run by one, or a pair of  
8 Anglican women missionaries of whom there seem to have been  
9 quite a lot around. Perhaps that was part of the aftermath  
10 of the Great War. Lots of women never got married because  
11 there was nobody to get married to, so they ended up in the  
12 Church. Anyway, he went to that school where you weren't  
13 allowed to speak anything but English on the school premises.

14 N: Mmm...

15 P: So he became very articulate, but in fact he never finished  
16 his schooling there - he had to go off and work and he worked  
17 as a domestic servant in Johannesburg and from there he  
18 gradually graduated to working in a shop, and became a  
19 storeman and so on. So - that image of authority had a  
20 pretty humble beginning.

21 N: Yes.

22 P: Undoubtedly being part of those communities gave a certain  
23 confidence to the people who came from them. I don't think  
24 there was at that time a sense of a sort of overwhelming body  
25 of proletarians, or whatever, waiting to get hold of anything  
26 that was going. I don't think so.

27 N: Implicitly I was importing current perceptions back in time  
28 ..(they speak at once)..?

29 P: Yes, yes. Which I don't think were there at that time.

30 N: Ja, ja.

31 P: But, what they wanted was to play their full part in an open  
32 society.

33 N: Part of what set me this line of questioning was a surprise  
34 I had this morning while paging through your 'Contemporary  
35 History'. At some stage (and I can't quite remember quitw

1 when) the franchise question (qualified versus universal) was  
2 raised again - when it was thought long settled - and the  
3 Transvaal Committee of the Party canvassed its branches and  
4 was somewhat astonished to find that the Alexandra and  
5 Sophiatown branches were in favour of the qualified franchise  
6 - which is a surprise after all that debate. And, you know,  
7 that's it: the linked questions of why those branches took  
8 that view and what they meant by it. Was this what Sally  
9 Msimang was reported at some stage to have said 'You don't  
10 want to alienate Whites at this stage' - a tactical view:  
11 times are hard, there's no point in demanding too much! Or  
12 did the view emerge from something deeper than that, and had  
13 some of them bought into the idea of an historical gradation,  
14 some people are more evolved, more 'civilised' than others?  
15 Was that the perception that some of them shared?

16 P: Yes, I don't remember that view coming from our Black Spot  
17 members ...

18 N: Oh! Yes...And from what you were saying, the presence of the  
19 tenants there - and the apparent solidarity between them and  
20 the landowners would have worked against that?

21 P: Yes.

22 N: Ja, ja. I want to focus on the branches where there was a  
23 wider common membership of all groups. Did the Party find  
24 operating with people from quite a range of educational and  
25 other backgrounds, a practical problem when it came to  
26 meetings, debates, discussions? I mean, to put the thing in  
27 context I felt myself in '61/'62, that some of the meetings  
28 in Grahamstown - of what was left of the Party at the time  
29 when I came to it from outside - were ridiculous. We had on  
30 the one hand, university teachers of politics and philosophy  
31 - like Terence Beard and Cedric Evans and others - and on the  
32 other hand we had people who were messengers or handymen at  
33 St Andrews School. Attempts to mount educational sessions  
34 or debates about Party policy, and questions beyond, were  
35 simply extremely difficult to do successfully - with a group

1 as diverse as that - as stratified, in a sense. I wondered  
2 whether that was just a feature of a particular branch where  
3 the polarisation in education and related was particularly  
4 marked, or whether that kind of thing showed up elsewhere?

5 P: I don't remember particularly. I'm sure it was a problem in  
6 some of the branches. Lots of them were all Black, and I  
7 suppose we were fortunate here in that we had quite a number  
8 of - of Black members who could - in a way - lead and control  
9 the discussion in that kind of branch. I'm trying to think  
10 of a branch like you described .... you see somewhere like  
11 Edendale, which was a branch - and which was a multi-racial  
12 branch, was there I suppose on the whole the level of  
13 sophistication was fairly high.

14 N: Yes, yes.

15 P: I don't remember it as a problem, but I'm sure that it was in  
16 some branches.

17 N: I'd like to jump a little and talk about the statement that  
18 you made when I think you were offered the Chairmanship of  
19 the National Party, which I think was in .....

20 **Note:** This was in 1959. 'Contemporary History...' p140 (top 3  
21 lines)

22 P: Yes, I think so.

23 N: And you took over from Alan Paton at that stage?

24 P: Ja.

25 N: And...

26 P: I can't remember what I said...

27 N: Oh, well (he chuckles). What you reported in the  
28 'Contemporary History' that was two things. One, you  
29 believed that the focus of party attention should be extra-  
30 parliamentary activities. You believed elections should be  
31 fought from time to time, but the focus should be extra-  
32 parliamentary. Secondly, if I remember this correctly there  
33 was a problem at the time of a pre-election ban on meetings  
34 of more than ten Africans and the question was whether  
35 defiance should be considered and so on. Your second point

1 was that to go the road of extra-parliamentary activity might  
2 lead one into having to grapple with questions of  
3 disobedience to the law with potential serious consequence.  
4 Now, was that kind of position you had got to something that  
5 developed out of your experience over the years, would you  
6 have said things like that back in '53?

7 P: No, I'm sure I wouldn't...

8 N: So that was learning from your experience or distilling it,  
9 reflecting on it?

10 P: Yes, of course, and learning more about the government we  
11 were confronted by ...

12 N: Ja, ja.

13 P: So I'm sure that that was an attitude which developed over  
14 time. In fact that line was only followed in very limited way  
15 with those 'sit ins' in the Cape where mixed groups went and  
16 sat in restaurants and - that kind of thing.

17 N: I was unaware of that - when did that take place - do you  
18 remember?

19 P: I don't know - but it would have been early '60s, I would  
20 have thought. Nododilr and people like that were involved.

21 N: Was that learning from American civil rights methods?

22 P: Yes, it was at that time, I suppose.

23 N: And that had Party endorsement did it?

24 P: Yes, it did.

25 N; But was relatively short-lived, I mean it - it wasn't repeated  
26 over long periods?

27 P: No, no.

28 N: Right. Am I hearing you correctly that you think that the  
29 kind of statement you made then raised the possibility that  
30 there was a potential path ahead of the Party which, in fact,  
31 they didn't take?

32 P: Yes. Norman, I think what happened in that particular case  
33 was that, in the end, the ban was - that proclamation,  
34 whatever it was - was withdrawn.

35 N: Oh, I see.

1 P: There were certainly cases of defiance, whether deliberate or  
2 not, I don't know. I was charged in Kokstad with attending  
3 an illegal meeting. And again up there near the Dunn  
4 Rerserve - whatever that place is - Mtunzini. Those were not  
5 occasions when I went out to defy the ban. In the Kokstad  
6 case there was a proclamation which applied to the Transkei.  
7 I was advised by Harry Pitman that Kokstad wasn't part of the  
8 Transkei. It was Mike Francis whose research showed he was  
9 wrong - but too late for me. So that, as far as we knew, was  
10 a legal meeting which turned out to be illegal.

11 N: Aha.

12 P: The Mtunzini case I can't remember the circumstances of that,  
13 but there was some tribal group which was involved in some  
14 land problem. How we got involved there I can't now  
15 remember, but certainly we had a meeting there and it seems we  
16 shouldn't have, in terms of the law.

17 N: Mhmmmm.

18 P: And, so all I'm saying is that there were certainly cases of  
19 breaking the law - but it wasn't part of a campaign or  
20 anything. You remember the 'Church Clause'?

21 N: Yes.

22 P: Archbishop Clayton said he wasn't prepared to accept that.  
23 The passage of time might have led to the kind of thing I  
24 suggested in that statement of mine, but in fact it never  
25 really came to anything and I suppose the reason probably was  
26 that the government began to get tougher and tougher.  
27 Although, on the other hand, that might have meant that  
28 defiance would have happened sooner. The fact of the matter  
29 is that there was certainly never any organised defiance  
30 campaign.

31 N: Let's say with the question of extra-parliamentary activity  
32 and the resort to kind of extra-parliamentary pressures. One  
33 type of activity in that category that emerged in the '50s,  
34 and carried on afterwards, was the support for certain kinds  
35 of boycotts. I think there were some problems over these

1 since some of the suggestions internally would emerge from  
2 Congress and then there'd be problems about the organisation  
3 and the logistics and so on. But, I think the Party did  
4 endorse, (did it not?) the use of the boycott internally and  
5 externally? I suppose the intention was that it would be  
6 used intelligently and critically.

7 P: Yes. The one that caused the most trouble within the party  
8 was the support of the overseas boycott which was intended  
9 (it looks pretty naive now) as something of short duration  
10 ...

11 N: Aha.

12 P: Three months or something - I seem to remember - which was to  
13 give the South African Government a slap on the wrist ...

14 N: Send them a signal...

15 P: Yes. But it was quite clearly a limited, a limited a -  
16 enterprise.

17

18 (Interview continues on second side of tape)

19

20 N: At the beginning of the Party and your commitment to it I  
21 think you said, and it applied to some query of mine, that  
22 you really had little idea of exactly what role the Party was  
23 to play, how things would evolve over time, etc. There were  
24 principles and a commitment to work towards their fulfilment,  
25 or achievement, but how it was all going to happen was not  
26 really clear at that stage. Now at this stage (i.e. by '58)  
27 when you're saying that the focus of the Party's attention  
28 must be on extra-parliamentary activities, did you have any  
29 clearer ideas of where pursuing that type of activity was  
30 going to get you? Was it simply that other things had proved  
31 fruitless and so one focused on what possibly could be  
32 fruitful, but had no clear idea of how it would be fruitful?  
33 Was it something one felt impelled to do, and there it was?  
34 Or was there a notion in your head, or in other peoples'  
35 heads, of how it might culminate in the achievement of goals?

1 P: I think it was something one felt impelled to do, I don't  
2 think there was a clear vision where it would lead. I think  
3 there was a sense that the impetus for change would probably  
4 come from Black pressure, that one should try to harness that  
5 pressure towards the achievement of the kind of society which  
6 we wanted to see. It all sounds very ambitious; one has to  
7 say that one didn't expect to see freedom in our lifetime -  
8 at that time anyway. I'm sure nobody did then in the late  
9 '50s, early '60s; you couldn't see victory on the horizon.  
10 So one felt impelled - I think that's right - but also to try  
11 and harness this potential force towards what we would have  
12 seen as good ends. Let say this, Norman: I don't believe in  
13 these visions of 'we do this and that, and that'll happen'.  
14 You do this and that and often something else happens - it  
15 seems to me to be a lesson of history, I think.

16 N: Mmmm...

17 P: One hopes to guide things toward a good end - not a perfect  
18 end, but a good end.

19 N: Ja. But the way you've just presented things involves the  
20 belief that there was a social force or dynamic that would  
21 move things along in spite of the regime's power. African  
22 resistance was mobilising, and even if crushed it was not  
23 foolish to believe it would rise again, - even if not in 'our  
24 lifetime'. To say you were 'on the side of history' is  
25 probably too strong, but you weren't simply whistling - alone  
26 - in the dark, were you?

27 P: No.

28 N: Ja. But quite how it was to happen and quite what the role  
29 of the Party was to be was another matter .....?

30 P: Yes, that was imponderable.

31 N: A little later. ('61 - '62) when arriving in Grahamstown, I  
32 thought that the mobilisation of some sort of collective  
33 action was the way one had to go (what perhaps one has learnt  
34 to call, in recent years, 'rolling mass action'!) Of course  
35 it didn't take me very long to discover that I was unlikely

1 to be able to organise rolling mass action on any scale at  
2 all in Grahamstown! What I initially had in mind were the  
3 withholding of labour, the withholding of purchasing power,  
4 street protests - on the one side, I suppose a threat, and on  
5 the other side a message to people, many of whom were unaware  
6 one would imagine. Anyway, those sorts of things. Now when  
7 you were talking in the way you did in 1958 about extra-  
8 parliamentary activities, these sorts of things would all  
9 have been possibilities at that stage would they? Some of  
10 them were realities already, but .... or am I, in making the  
11 kind of list that I have, going beyond the sort of thing  
12 which you would have been drawn to?\*

13 P: Well, I wouldn't have been drawn to it.

14 N: Ah, yes.

15 P: But I had, I think, come to the conclusion that that kind of  
16 activity was necessary. I think one should say though that  
17 the history of that kind of activity was one of failure..

18 N: Yes.

19 P: Because even in 1961 when the mass stayaway was called it was  
20 a flop. It was called off, I think, after the first day. It  
21 had been called off by the All-In-African Conference, from  
22 which by the time of the stay-at-home our people had  
23 withdrawn because they thought it had been highjacked by the  
24 Left. It didn't work because the State was too powerful.  
25 The most effective protest up to that time had been the PAC-  
26 inspired one in 1960.

27 N: Yea.

28 P: So, my statement about extra-parliamentary activities sounds  
29 more potent than in fact it was.

30 N: It was signalling a state of mind on the question?

31 P: Yes.

32 N: ...a personal position?

33 P: Yes, I suppose it was. But it was also, I suppose, a  
34 response to the Wollheim line which was that one put all, or  
35 most of, one's energies into elections.

1 N: Ja. One might say that two years later you had a taste of  
2 the likely cost of political activity of the kind that you  
3 had in mind in 1958 - when you were imprisoned during the  
4 State of Emergency.

5 P: Yes.

6 N: I wonder whether you could talk about that experience, for  
7 the record? I think I have the date down as March the 29th,  
8 1960, and I think there was a certain amount of toing and  
9 froing right at the start, was whether the State of Emergency  
10 had been declared in Bergville and ...?

11 P: It was even more confused than that. The copy of the  
12 proclamation, or whatever it was, hadn't reached 'Maritzburg.  
13 So we were detained in the middle of whatever night it was,  
14 but then we were let out again the next day, and then we went  
15 back later the same day, as far as I can remember. But as  
16 you say, at the jail there were a whole lot of our members  
17 from Bergville who were let out that day, or the next day,  
18 because the Emergency didn't apply to Bergville. It really  
19 was a balls-up.

20 N: Mmmm...The State of Emergency was precipitated in the  
21 aftermath of Sharpeville, and the Pass Campaign before it,  
22 was it?

23 P: It was precipitated by, I suppose, the follow-up to  
24 Sharpeville which was, first, that the ANC called on people  
25 to burn their passes, and Luthuli in fact burnt his in the  
26 house of Tony Brink, one of our members from Pretoria.  
27 (Tony's still got the ashes there somewhere - Luthuli's  
28 pass.) So, I suppose the Emergency was a response to a whole  
29 lot of things - Sharpeville and what was happening in Cape  
30 Town, and then to the ANC joining in and so on. But I don't  
31 know what the principle the detentions was, because it seemed  
32 to me anyway that the people they detained, particularly  
33 here, were particularly involved in White/Black work. But on  
34 the other hand it may have just been some petty local  
35 recommendation because I mean Derick Marsh was detained: he

1 had been the Chairman of the 'Maritzburg branch, and he  
2 certainly was very active but he hadn't any particular  
3 contacts across the colour line that I know of. In the Cape  
4 where people like Patrick Duncan had good contacts in the  
5 Black communities, no Liberals were detained. It didn't make  
6 sense really. How they picked and chose, I don't know.

7 N: Aha..Is it possible to describe the experience in some short  
8 way? In looking back to it now, from this perspective, is it  
9 a vivid kind of thing that you are pleased that you went  
10 through, and you wouldn't like to have missed, or was it a  
11 somewhat more painful experience than that?

12 P: Well, I suppose it was a bit of both. Obviously as far as  
13 family is concerned, it was painful, but I think as far as  
14 the experience itself went, it was quite important, I think  
15 it was good for the Liberal Party. We were fortunate, I  
16 suppose, here: there were three of us and we got on quite  
17 well together, and obviously (as I said when I was talking  
18 about the army) that kind of experience does form a lasting  
19 bond between people unless they find they can't live in the  
20 same room together for however long it is. So ...

21 N: The three were you, Marsh, and Meidner?

22 P: And Meidner, yes. So I think the answer to it is that it was  
23 painful, but important.

24 N: You talked about 'the same room', were you in the same cell?

25 P: Yes.

26 N: Just the three of you, or were you with others?

27 P: No, just the three of us.

28 N: Were there others in 'Maritzburg who were arrested at the  
29 same time, from Congress or...?

30 P: Yes, but they were on the other side of the apartheid line.  
31 I mean there was Elliot Mngadi and others from Ladysmith and  
32 those people from Liberal branches in the Bergville area.  
33 And of course Motala and co, who were from Congress. But  
34 they were not held where we were.

35 N: Aha. What kind of regime were you subjected to, I mean, did

1       you eat in your cells? It actually was a jail was it - that  
2       you were in?

3 P:    Yes.

4 N:    It wasn't a police station?

5 P:    No, it was a jail. So we were taken out to wash and have a  
6       cold shower and so on in the morning and then we had exercise  
7       later in the day. I can't remember whether it was an hour,  
8       or half an hour. Otherwise we just, we just sat there.

9 N:    And the meals they brought to you?

10 P:   Yes. They brought them to us...

11 N:   You didn't eat in a diningroom or something?

12 P:   No.

13 N:   So you were just, in general, left there? What about  
14       interrogations?

15 P:   Well, yes, but I mean so perfunctory that they amounted to  
16       nothing really. The Head of the Special Branch at that time  
17       in 'Maritzburg had done the same job under Smuts. I remember  
18       he was reported to have said to Motala that 'Look, I'm only  
19       doing my job. When you take over, I'd do it for you.' It was  
20       early days of the whole detention regime.

21 N:   And the three of you together there, how in fact did time  
22       pass? Did you invent games, did you talk a lot, I suppose  
23       you probably did? How did time pass?

24 P:   Well, after a while we were allowed to have books sent in,  
25       and paper and so on. And what then happened was that Derick  
26       Marsh sat down and wrote his Masters thesis. He wrote most  
27       of that while he was in there. I tried to write a sort of a  
28       short story thing. Poor old Hans, he really didn't have  
29       anything to do much. But we certainly talked quite a lot, we  
30       played cards, of which Meidner was absolutely hopeless.  
31       Derick was the sort of professional card sharp who'd grown up  
32       as a racing man - he owned a race horse when he was a student  
33       at Grahamstown. He was a gambler by instinct, so we couldn't  
34       really compete with him. I think really that's it: we did  
35       some writing and everyone read and read and read and talked.

1 The warders in a way were a bit nervous. They didn't quite  
2 know how to handle these people. One of the highlights of  
3 our incarceration was during exercise. A little flower  
4 popped up in the corner of the exercise yard - one of the  
5 warders went very respectfully to the distinguished botanist,  
6 Dr Meidner, and said: 'Doctor, what's that flower? What is  
7 that flower?' And Hans looked at it and said: 'I don't  
8 know.'

9 N: And ... this went on for what length of time?

10 P: Well, Derick was released, I think after about six weeks to  
11 two months and we were released after about three months.

12 N: Now, somewhere I've read or heard that there was a question  
13 about your not wanting to be released as long as - was it  
14 other Liberals, or other persons - were still detained? Is  
15 there a story about that?

16 P: Yes, well, Phoebe's mother had recently married a very  
17 interfering sort of fellow who made it his job to try and get  
18 me out of the jail. And went to Harry Lawrence, I think, who  
19 had been Minister of Justice in the last Smuts government,  
20 and said 'you must do something about this fellow.' And  
21 somehow or other this step-father-in-law of mine got  
22 permission to see me in the jail. Anyway, the upshot of it  
23 was that they told me I could be released on certain  
24 conditions, and I - as you rightly say - said no, I wasn't  
25 prepared to be and certainly not while anyone else was in  
26 there.

27 N: Aha.

28 P: But, in fact when they did finally release us they imposed  
29 those conditions anyway, which were much the same as a  
30 banning order.

31 N: Oh, is that right? I hadn't known that.

32 P: Yes. And those were in place until the Emergency was finally  
33 lifted in about September, I suppose, some time round about  
34 there.

35 N: I see. Aha, aha. So they could impose an effective ban

1 (without it being formal banning) for the duration of the  
2 Emergency?

3 P: Yes.

4 N: I see, aha, aha. What I hadn't known was that no Liberals in  
5 the Cape were arrested, so that the actual rationale for the  
6 pattern of detentions is somewhat puzzling - given Duncan's  
7 activation.

8 P: Yes, yes. It is.

9 N: Well, from what you say, it sounds as though, locally here,  
10 by comparison with the capacities that the police developed  
11 later, the whole thing was rather unconsidered and inept. In  
12 other words someone was acting without very adequate  
13 information about the political organisations involved and  
14 about what was likely to happen or not happen, and so on.

15 P: Yes, and they were out of date. They went to arrest Derick  
16 at a house that he had left months before, and where he no  
17 longer lived.

18 N: Ja, ja. There are two things that come out of the detention  
19 or imprisonment that I'd like to talk about. The one (and  
20 you've mentioned it in passing before) is the question of  
21 your family life and how that affected you, and was in turn  
22 affected by your political activities. Presumably, Phoebe had  
23 been a Party supporter, at least, from the start?

24 P: Yes.

25 N: She'd been a member actually, had she, in the early days?

26 P: Yes.

27 N: Ja. During the time that your activity became more extensive  
28 and also threats of various kinds and dangers, came over the  
29 horizon, (if I may ask you, you can decline to answer if you  
30 wish), was the question of the degree of your involvement and  
31 so on an issue between you, or a matter of debate - if you  
32 like, or some disagreement, or was it something you could  
33 settle, you could handle?

34 P: No, it wasn't an issue because she never made it an issue.  
35 I'm sure she wasn't happy about - well, about the possible

1 spin-offs, but she certainly never made an issue of it.

2 N: If I remember correctly, you got married in 1950, your last  
3 year as a student, so the family would have started arriving  
4 during the 50s?

5 P: Yes. 1951, I think, we had twins and then Anton in 1955.

6 N: So that - when you were inside, you had three children who  
7 were ten and younger?

8 P: Ja. I think that almost certainly had an effect on them.

9 N: On them?

10 P: Yes, was certainly, I mean, Christopher has kept well clear  
11 of anything political all his life. Vanessa, as a student,  
12 was certainly involved in Cape Town in those police/student  
13 confrontations whenever they were. But she hasn't done  
14 anything since then. Anton 's moved from being, not quite an  
15 AWB, but certainly Conservative Party, to being a sort of a  
16 liberal now.

17 N: Aha.

18 P: And he's certainly very interested, I mean it's all you can  
19 do to stop him talking politics, asking difficult questions.

20 N: But the conservative phase you see as a reaction to dominant  
21 family orthodoxies?

22 P: Yes. I think so.

23 N: Ah. In the Slovo sense of absent fathers and mothers and so  
24 on, and do you think the elder children, or all of them, had  
25 some of that to bear? I mean were you away quite a bit when  
26 you were travelling on meetings, or was that not so much the  
27 issue?

28 P: No, I think the issue really was having parents out of the  
29 mainstream to which their peers' parents belonged. I think  
30 that was probably a problem.

31 N: Aha. They had to carry you around their necks, as it were?

32 P: Ja. That's what I think.

33 N: Yes, yes.

34 N: Let's broaden the theme of your personal and family life to  
35 that of your social environment. You met Phoebe at the races

1 and Clay wrote an article about you as a 'crusader on a polo  
2 pony'! Horse-racing, polo-playing, the social life of an  
3 affluent member of an old Natal family - did your life in  
4 that world carry on in the 1950's and beyond? You were still  
5 a young man in your late twenties and thirties - were your  
6 earlier interests and activities simply pushed away into the  
7 corners of your life by politics, or is it not as dramatic as  
8 that?

9 P: To say I made it policy is putting it far too strongly, but  
10 what I tried to do was to keep involved as much as I could  
11 with those associations. There were certainly awkwardnesses  
12 at times, but I never had any sort of overt reactions, and I  
13 think it was important that I maintained that appearance of  
14 some sort of normality in those peoples' eyes. Because I  
15 think, in a way, when they had to adjust to change, it made  
16 it a bit easier for them. So, as I say, it was sometimes  
17 awkward and certainly there were some people who turned away,  
18 but on the whole that was not the case. And it is surprising,  
19 people who never dared raise, or refrained from ever asking,  
20 a political question of me in the past, now can't stop asking  
21 them and I don't know the answers. I suppose they are  
22 looking for some sort of reassurance or something like that.

23 N: This you are experiencing now?

24 P: Yes, yes. 'What's going on? What's going on?' And so on  
25 and so forth. I mean in the past they would never have  
26 dreamt of raising a political question - but socially, there  
27 were no problems.

28 N: Did some of those people make crosses for you do you think in  
29 the elections? Perhaps they would never have considered  
30 joining the Party, but...?

31 P: Well, I think some would have, I'm sure they did. And quite a lot  
32 of them, I suppose, became Progs in the end - of people that we  
33 knew. Well, particularly here in 'Maritzburg, I suppose. As far  
34 as the country was concerned, well, we had our few members and  
35 they had friends and if their friends didn't think they were crazy

1           they might think well, maybe the whole thing isn't all that crazy.

2 N:       Yes, yea. You were not playing polo, were you?

3 P:       Yes...

4 N:       Until when did you play?

5 P:       Well, I played until I was banned, at Mooi River, and then

6           after I was banned there was a polo club at Ottos Bluff which

7           was within the Magisterial district and so I decided I would

8           play there - which they were quite happy about. But I think

9           that in a way it was a bit of an eye-opener to them because

10          I used to stay on my own - away from everyone else and this

11          certainly made them think. They knew that they could only

12          come and talk to me one at a time - which they did. But it

13          use to confuse people and worried them a bit, that this

14          strange treatment was being dished out to this person whom

15          they regarded as fairly normal.

16 N:       I see, so the law, as it was interpreted, was that you could

17          play with a group, but you couldn't talk to more than one at

18          a time?

19 P:       Well, there were those crazy things about people going to a

20          cinema and whether that was 'attending a gathering' and it

21          was held not to be attending ... because you didn't go with

22          a common purpose. But how that would have applied to a game,

23          I don't know, but anyway I took a chance on that.

24 N:       And they never attempted to pin you on that?

25 P:       No...

26 N:       Another thing that occurred to me while speaking about the

27          imprisonment was some questions about some of the people in

28          the Liberal Party in Natal - Meidner - for instance - whom

29          you mentioned, and who was with you, and was Natal Chairman

30          at some stage. Now he was a University botanist, was he?

31 P:       Yes.

32 N:       Yes. What the 'Contemporary History' said was that he put

33          some emphasis on training - political training - and from my

34          skimming of the thing it wasn't clear to me what kind of

35          training this was. Could you say a little more about that?

1 P: Well, this was started at Neil Alcock's initiative.  
2 N: Aha.  
3 P: And it was training in how to run a meeting, how to run a  
4 branch - all that kind of basic organisational, political  
5 organisational stuff. He included in these things, how to  
6 share a meal, or how to behave at a meal if you were going to  
7 eat in a White house - knives and forks and what you must do  
8 and so on and so on. It wasn't just political - it was sort  
9 of basic integration into a different kind of society that he  
10 was getting people taught about, as well as the other things.  
11 N: Yes, I see, right.  
12 P: And Meidner was the person who organised those courses at  
13 those schools and they'd take place over a weekend and go  
14 through all these various steps.  
15 N: So it wasn't training in theory or political principles or  
16 ...?  
17 P: Well, they would have talked about what the Liberal Party  
18 stood for ... but not theory, I'm sure.  
19 N: Yes...The emphasis would have been on the more organisational  
20 skills that were required for efficient and effective  
21 operation?  
22 P: Yes, yes...we had all these branches. In many of them,  
23 particularly in places like Charlestown, there was a  
24 committee and so on and so forth. But in many of these other  
25 places there was nothing like that.  
26 N: Did you ever - the question just pops into my head - did you  
27 ever have problems with branches and money going missing and  
28 so on?  
29 P: There was very little money, of course - I don't know, five  
30 bob per year, or something like that. And the one thing we  
31 were very strict about was that you paid if you wanted to be  
32 a member; you joined, and then you kept paying each year.  
33 N: Mmm. I noticed in the 'Contemporary History' that you said  
34 this gave rise to some problems about the membership tallies  
35 - you would often get people who would pay one year and

1           then....miss a year, and then pay again.

2 N:       Ja...Would it be okay to ask whether, let's say in the '50s

3           when as you say there was very little money, you in fact put

4           a good deal of money into the Party yourself? I mean, your

5           own services would presumably not have been remunerated, so

6           there's that whole contribution. But, beyond that ....?

7 P:       Yes, not vast amounts. We never had vast amounts, but enough

8           to keep it going. And then we used to try and fundraise -

9           not very successfully ...I never did that, but Alan was

10          occasionally pulled in to go and see various big shots in

11          Johannesburg. I think probably through that he became quite

12          friendly with Harry Oppenheimer who gave us a bit of money,

13          but not a great deal.

14 N:       Yes.

15 P:       So, mainly it was bits and pieces from various people who

16          could afford to do it, and jumble sales and all that kind of

17          thing.

18 N:       You didn't financially carry the Party - in Natal, or South

19          Africa?

20 P:       No.

21

22 (End of third session tape, second side).