

PRESENTATION BY LOUISE ASMAL

AT THE ANTI-APARTHEID SOLIDARITY

CONFERENCE - DURBAN, 2004

The Irish Anti-Apartheid Movement (IAAM) became, over the years, one of the most successful movements – not in terms of the effect we had on South Africa, though on the sporting field in particular we did have an effect – but in terms of the enthusiastic support the Irish people gave to the struggle, across all sections of society.

In the early 60's, at the start of the solidarity struggle, very few people in Ireland could have told you what apartheid was. Yet when the Rivonia Trial started in 1964, there was an immediate response to the plight of those involved.

The forced removal of people, the Group Areas, found an echo in Irish colonial history, the Irish penal laws, and the forcible expulsion of the native Irish by Oliver Cromwell. Lord Salisbury, PM of Britain in 1949? said Irish and Hottentots were “lesser races, unfit for self-government.”

Gradually, the enormity of apartheid began to impinge on Irish consciousness. The IAAM was small in numbers, but rich in the devoted committee members who invaded our house every other Monday night for pretty well 27 years, who planned the campaigns, organized fund-raising events, stuffed leaflets into envelopes.

We got information from the ANC, English AAM, IDAF and the UN Centre against Apartheid and we circulated it everywhere we could.

We had very little funding that we did not raise ourselves – and here I should pay tribute to the many musicians who sang for us at concerts, and often turned down lucrative offers to tour South Africa as well. Poets like Seamus Heaney read for us, Sean O'Casey and Samuel Beckett were among the first signatories of a list of playwrights who refused to allow their plays to be performed in South Africa.

But of course it was the sports boycott which aroused the most passion and the most controversy. (1969-'70 Springbok rugby tour – 8000).

In 1984 Mary Manning, a young trade unionist working in a supermarket in Dublin, refused to register the sale of an Outspan grapefruit. She and 10 others who supported her were suspended, and went on strike for three and a half years. For those three and a half years we organized a Saturday picket outside the store, but

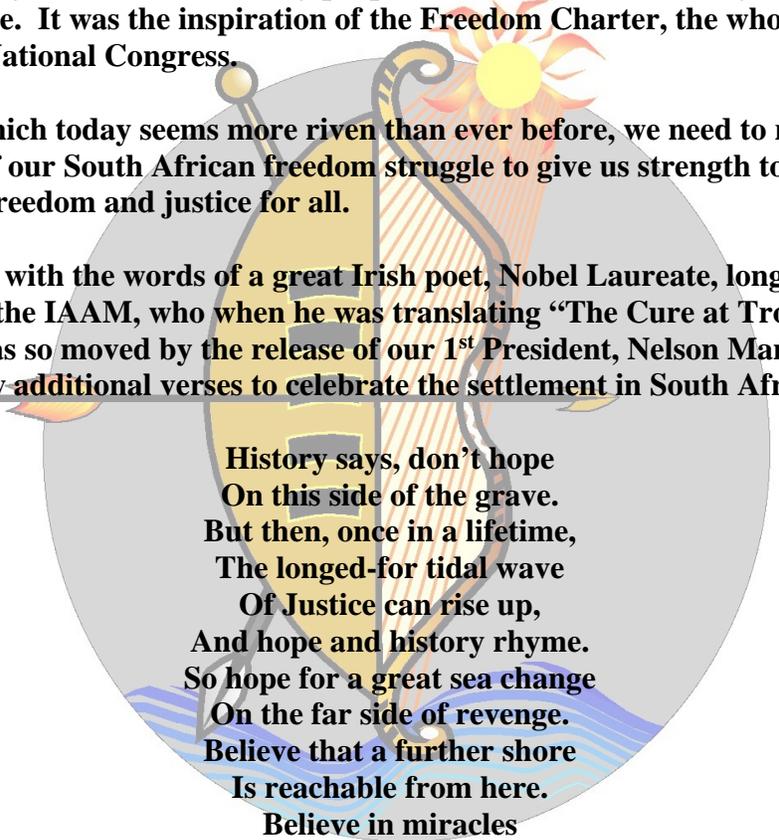
management refused to respond to our letters and refused to meet us. In 1987 the Irish Government imposed sanctions on South African fruit and produce.

It is difficult to estimate the exact effect our activities had on South Africa. But I would strongly maintain that the benefits were far from one-sided. We met extraordinary people – to give just one example, OR Tambo, who came to Dublin in 1979 and spoke at a major conference we organised to oppose European trade with South Africa – “the lifeblood of apartheid” as OR had called it. And we can be proud that that conference strengthened the links between the various European solidarity movements.

But it was not just the extraordinary people, it was the extraordinary nature of the whole struggle. It was the inspiration of the Freedom Charter, the whole ethos of the African National Congress.

In a world which today seems more riven than ever before, we need to return to the inspiration of our South African freedom struggle to give us strength to continue to struggle for freedom and justice for all.

I want to end with the words of a great Irish poet, Nobel Laureate, long-time supporter of the IAAM, who when he was translating “The Cure at Troy” by Euripides, was so moved by the release of our 1st President, Nelson Mandela, that he inserted a few additional verses to celebrate the settlement in South Africa:



History says, don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime,
The longed-for tidal wave
Of Justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.
So hope for a great sea change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore
Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.

We need to celebrate great achievements. We need our dreams of a future world free of wars and poverty.

I hope this conference contributes to the realisation of those dreams.