

**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

Fourth interview with Colin Gardner
conducted by Ruth Lundie
on 7 August 1998
at the Alan Paton Centre

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KWAZULU-NATAL ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

**INTERVIEW WITH COLIN GARDNER
CONDUCTED BY RUTH LUNDIE ON 7 AUGUST 1998
AT THE ALAN PATON CENTRE**

(TAPE TWO – INTERVIEW FOUR)

**(‘C’ SHALL INDICATE THE INTERVIEWEE AND ‘R’ THE
INTERVIEWER)**

R: On the 7th of August. Colin, before we begin I want you to put onto tape the story of Albert Luthuli in Pretoria - can you remember?

C: Yes, 1958: I was then on the staff at UNISA. I was a member of the Liberal Party; I was a member of what you might call the white Liberal fringe, and a fairly small fringe it was in the Pretoria of those days - a Pretoria of triumphalist absolute apartheid. One really felt that one was smothered by Afrikaner domination in that place. But at the same time, within Pretoria University and within UNISA, there were a few young Afrikaner intellectuals who were beginning to be dissatisfied with what was happening in the country - and I have to say that one of the features of the story of apartheid, all 30 or 40 years of it, was that from time to time Afrikaner intellectuals would be unhappy and would do things which the government would often squash in one way or another. Anyhow, this was one of those occasions. A group of Afrikaner intellectuals decided to hold a meeting at which they were going to invite Albert Luthuli to come and speak to them - and it was a very bold thing for Afrikaners to do in those days. But they had a feeling, one assumes, that Luthuli, who was of course very unpopular with the government, had things to say that it would be useful for them to hear. So they decided to have a public meeting at which Luthuli would speak. They couldn't find, as far as I remember, any Afrikaner hall in which the meeting could be held: nobody would allow their hall to be used for such nefarious purposes. So interestingly enough the meeting took place in the hall of the Anglican Cathedral, St Alban's, and quite a large group of

1 people came along: they were the Afrikaner dissenters, the bold ones, the intellectuals,
2 but the English-speaking Liberal dissenting group came along too. So I was there and
3 most members of the local Liberal Party as well. As far as I remember, it took place fairly
4 early one evening, and Albert Luthuli found himself addressing quite a large body of
5 people. I'm not sure how many, but I would guess probably a hundred and fifty people
6 there, sitting in this hall on their metal chairs. The chairman of the meeting was a young
7 Afrikaner; the secretary, I remember, was a young Afrikaner too. The chairman was a
8 man, the secretary (as of course is normal with secretaries), a woman. The platform they
9 were on was quite high, so they were quite high above as we sat in the body of the hall.
10 The meeting started, and the chairman got up to give an explanation of why it was that
11 such a group of people had invited Albert Luthuli to address them. As he was speaking a
12 group of people came into the door and started walking round the room: they split into
13 two as they came into the door, and some went left and some went right, and one
14 immediately felt this was an odd moment, because they didn't look like the kind of
15 people - they didn't look like the kind of Afrikaner who would naturally come along to
16 listen to Albert Luthuli. Anyhow they took their places round the hall - almost like some
17 kind of military guard: there must have been 30, 40 of them, so they were standing round
18 the hall - a few feet from each other - each a few feet away from the other. And the
19 chairman looked around - seemed a bit surprised. We were all rather surprised: we didn't
20 know what to make of these people. And as the chairman continued to speak, one of the
21 men who had come in jumped up onto the stage - made his way onto the stage somehow,
22 I'm not quite sure; I suppose there must have been some stairs at the side - walked up
23 onto the stage, stood before the chairman, and then put his hand in his pocket and took
24 out a glove. We all watched amazed, mesmerized. He took out this glove, put it on his
25 right hand, and then walked up to the chairman and punched him in the face, knocking
26 him over onto his head, and we all gasped with astonishment. This was such a strange
27 and unexpected thing to happen in the middle of what was after all a civilised meeting of
28 people who were hoping to have an exchange of views. Then what happened was that
29 the men who were by now as it were guarding the audience - standing round the outside -
30 moved into the hall, moved to the audience, and in a sort of matter-of-fact way - it almost

1 struck me, because I watched this in astonishment - in a matter-of-fact way, not looking
2 angry, not showing much emotion at all, they picked up the chairs that people were not
3 sitting on - or if they couldn't find a chair that nobody was sitting on they pushed a
4 person off the chair - and then they proceeded to hit people over the head with these
5 metal chairs, and of course immediately there was a tremendous din. It's actually rather
6 noisy to hit people over the head with metal chairs, especially when they occasionally
7 bang against each other, so suddenly there was this huge noise - people running in all
8 directions, screaming, shouting in horror. Meanwhile on the stage a number of the
9 visitors had got onto the stage by now. Albert Luthuli was kept under the table and lay
10 there throughout this uproar. The secretary - this was the nastiest moment - the young
11 woman secretary was picked up and thrown off the stage.

12 R: Oh that was dreadful!

13 C: Yes, mercifully she didn't seem to be seriously hurt, but I mean she could have been
14
15 killed. It was quite a high stage - I would guess it was about four, I think it was five feet
16 high - and as I say the uproar continued. I had been sitting towards the edge of the crowd
17 and rushed out of the hall, found a telephone, 'phoned the police, who came I suppose in
18 about ten minutes. By that time - as far as I can remember - the breaking-up of the
19 meeting had been completed, and the men (who I discovered afterwards were from
20 ISCOR) had begun to disperse, or disappear. When the police came they took down
21 statements, and I have to say that later the leader of this group - the man who had walked
22 onto the stage and punched the chairman, his name was Claasen - I seem to remember
23 that he was actually prosecuted and fined for his offence... But when we knew what had
24 happened, there was a tremendous feeling of corporate guilt among the whites -
25 particularly I should think the Afrikaners. Certainly I - perhaps in my rather arrogant
26 liberal way - felt a little bit of an outsider to the event: I certainly didn't feel that the
27 ISCOR people had in any sense been representing me or were a part of the group in
28 society that I came from, whereas obviously the Afrikaner intellectuals felt that these
29 ISCOR people were their sons or their cousins: they somehow in that sense felt
30 implicated in what had happened. But everybody picked themselves up, got themselves
31 together, the chairs were put back, and I suppose after about twenty-five minutes, Albert
32

1 Luthuli began to address the meeting. When he stood up and started to speak...

2
3 R: Who helped him out from under the table?

4
5 C: Oh, I'm not sure. I can't remember the details of that. I don't think he was badly hurt; I
6 don't think he was hurt at all: I think he got kicked under the table and stayed there and
7 was told that was probably the safest place he could be - one of the safest places he could
8 be during this uproar. And as I say, the aggressors seemed, as often happens in these
9 cases, much more angry with the Afrikaners who had sponsored the meeting than with
10 Chief Luthuli himself. I think they felt: 'Well you know, you can understand Chief
11 Luthuli', or 'We're not going to attack him for holding his views; we do attack
12 Afrikaners who go along with these views or who allow them to be voiced.' Anyhow,
13 when Chief Luthuli stood up to address the meeting - before he could say a word - he got
14 a huge standing ovation from this whole audience, and as far as I remember they
15 applauded him for about five minutes - which was the longest standing ovation I have
16 ever heard. And I think it was a tribute to him that he was willing to come and talk, in
17 spite of that, but it was also a sort of guilt catharsis: you know the people felt what had
18 happened was terrible and they could only show their feelings by giving this huge ovation
19 to Albert Luthuli. He then spoke - it was the kind of speech that you would have
20 expected Albert Luthuli to give - very reasonable, very reconciliatory, very
21 understanding, yet at the same time making strongly the points that an ANC President
22 would make. And he didn't mention the incident at all: he gave the speech as he would
23 have given it anyhow: there was no reference at all to the fact that he had spent a quarter
24 of an hour lying under a table on the platform.

25
26 R: But he was essentially a courteous person.

27
28 C: Yes, and it was a wonderful performance, and of course for it he was rewarded by the
29 government a week or so later by being banned.

30
31 R: Yes.

32
33 C: And confined to Groutville, so that he wouldn't make any more voyages into Pretoria to
34 embarrass people...

35
36 R: Oh, Colin...

37
38 C: Anyhow, it was certainly a memorable moment. It has stuck in my mind as one of the

1 instances of South African political mindsets.

2
3 R: Yes, well thank you for that, and now I think we must get back to the late 1980s.

4
5 C: Back to where we were ... the mid-1980s. Now I've said quite a lot about the 1980s, but I
6 would like to say a little bit about the UDF during the days when it was banned. Yes it
7 was a bit strange. One can see now in retrospect very clearly that the government's
8 banning various organisations in 1986 was a very desperate last ditch stand against what
9 even they could sense had by then become inevitable. But still they tried to quell the UDF.
10 The UDF I remember, rather charmingly, was allowed to do anything; they were allowed
11 to have money, they could carry on with their ordinary lives; the only thing they weren't
12 allowed to do was, as far as I remember, anything which had to do with political protest.
13 I remember writing a letter to the paper, saying this was a little bit like banning or saying
14 of a football club that it could carry on with all its activities, except playing football...
15 The government seemed to feel quite pleased with the fact that they had allowed the UDF
16 to do other things than politics. But the UDF continued underground. In the early days of
17 the Emergency a very large number of UDF people were arbitrarily detained, some of
18 them for two weeks, others for several months. I myself was not detained and perhaps I
19 should say a little bit about that ... Throughout the whole of the apartheid period I was not
20 detained or imprisoned once. And I have often felt there was something rather
21 dishonourable about this...

22
23 R: Why do you think it was?

24
25 C: All the people I knew had been in detention.... Well, it seemed as if I wasn't really living
26 fully the life in which the people I worked with were living. For them detention was a
27 part of being in an opposition movement. Some of the people I know and knew had been
28 detained five, six, seven times - sometimes for periods of many months - and I just didn't
29 get detained at any time, even though I was much involved in a fair number of activities.
30 I used to feel worried about this. All the people I knew used to laugh at it and say how
31 foolish to feel anxious about it. There were moments when I thought that some people
32 might put or try to put two and two together, and say 'It's funny that everybody gets
33 detained except Colin Gardner: could it be that he is a spy?' But I have to say that if
34 people did say that I never became aware of it; I wasn't aware that anybody had at any

1 point ever suspected me of being a spy. The general picture I think was that I was an
2 awkward person to detain because I was a Professor and had been Dean of the Faculty of
3 Arts, and the government had always tried not to detain high-profile people...

4
5 R: That is what I would have thought.

6
7 C: That's one of the reasons they never detained and they never banned Alan Paton, who
8 was a considerably more high-profile person than I was. I think that was the reason, but I
9 do still have slightly a sense that not having been detained was a kind of dishonour. But
10 still that's my own - my private thing. Just to go back into that part of my career. Three
11 times during the apartheid era I was charged with offences. I have talked about the time
12 when I was charged for having quoted Peter Brown at a Liberal Party meeting: that
13 charge was dropped. Later, together with Christopher Merrett and Gay Spiller, I was
14 charged with illegally, supposedly illegally, collecting money for the Detainees Support
15 Committee when we were not a recognised...

16
17 R: Welfare Organisation?

18
19 C: ...welfare organization. We had made an appeal for money and the claim was that we
20 made the appeal to the public, and we had therefore gone against the law. This case
21 dragged on for some time, and the three of us appeared in court - appeared in the
22 Magistrates' court three times I think. But again the case was eventually dropped. And
23 then I was charged once more, together with a large number of people - and this was the
24 only time I spent a half a night in jail. That was just before the elections in September
25 1989 when a large number of university people - members of staff and students - decided
26 to march off the campus in protest against - I can't even remember what it was now. And
27 we were all arrested. put into police vans and taken to a special jail that was started up for
28 the purpose along Edendale Road. And we spent about twelve hours in that specially
29 contrived jail, and then we were brought to the Magistrate's Court in the middle of the
30 night..

31
32 R: I hope so - it must have been the early hours of the morning?

33
34 C: I think it was about one o'clock that we were told that we were being charged and we
35 would all have to reappear a month later. That was also dropped - because I think the
36 authorities realised that to get four hundred and fifty people into the Magistrates' Court -

1 all in a fairly jovial mood - was not going to be triumph for the Justice system. So they
2 dropped that as well. But I'd like to say a little bit about that moment in jail. That was
3 quite a moment, because what happened was that we were brought from the march: our
4 march was stopped in King Edward Avenue, and these huge yellow police vans came in
5 waves to take us away, so we - I suppose each one held about thirty people. So groups of
6 thirty carried on arriving at this jail throughout the afternoon, and of course as a new
7 group arrived, they would be greeted with cheers by the other people who were there and
8 once we were all in this huge room, it was a fairly unruly group of people, and the police
9 - who I think were not wholly convinced that they were doing the right thing, collecting
10 us at all - the police were embarrassed. They didn't know how to control these people - a
11 lot of activist students, and the more activist sections of the staff. I was at that time the
12 chairperson of the Joint Academic Staff Association, so the police asked me "Can you
13 keep these people in order?" you see. So I said 'Well, can I speak to them?' and they said
14 'Yes.' And I spoke to them by using a - what is it? - a battery-charged loud hailer which
15 somehow one of these people had smuggled into the jail - which was an amazing thing to
16 bring into a police station! So I spoke to people on this loud hailer and I gave what was
17 after all a political speech, but it was aimed to keep people fairly calm and not actually to
18 have a riot in jail. But I said some quite tough things about what was going on in the
19 country, and I remember thinking it was rather remarkable that I should make a political
20 speech to about four hundred people inside a jail.

21
22 R: Yes, quite.

23
24 C: As far as I could see the general - the general support..

25
26 R: ..consent?

27
28 C: Yes, the consent of the people was there. Anyhow the whole thing was farcical. And the
29 next day was election day and we were all afraid they were going to keep us in so that
30 nobody would be able to vote, but in fact they did let us out in the end.

31
32 R: They let you out if I remember - yes...

33
34 C: We were allowed to vote - those of us who had the vote. Alright, so let me now return to
35 the late 1980s and say that one of the striking aspects of the UDF's being banned was that
36 all its meetings were of course illegal, so we had to find places where the UDF could

1 meet, and there was a general feeling that of all the places in Pietermaritzburg, the one
2 that the government would least enjoy having to raid was the University. So we decided
3 that we would meet at the University, and indeed the UDF Midlands Committee used to
4 meet at about 4:30 in the afternoon, once or twice a week, in my large room at the
5 University. It was quite a nice large room - that we used for department meetings and for
6 tutorials - and it could quite easily hold twenty people or so. One or two of these
7 meetings were really quite striking. On one occasion I counted the number who were
8 there, and at this particular meeting there were twenty people present: nineteen of them
9 had been detained, fairly recently; the one who hadn't was, of course, me. But more
10 interestingly, eight of the people were on the run from the police: the police were trying
11 to find these people..

12 R: It would have been a good haul..

13 C: Yes, so it was interesting, and then of course after the meeting we would disperse. We
14 would usually finish the meeting shortly after dark, and people would disperse in
15 different directions.

16 R: Melt away?

17 C: In a very unobtrusive way, yes. Another thing that I haven't mentioned is that during
18 those periods another body, which as far as I remember was banned, was COSATU. I
19 think it was banned because, suddenly, holding trade union meetings was not considered
20 to be a good idea, as obviously a lot of the people in COSATU were also involved in the
21 UDF. COSATU used to hold meetings in the basement of the Old Main Building - what
22 was then the English Honours Room. The COSATU people referred to - I thought a little
23 insultingly - as the dungeon, and I remember that meetings were held there quite often.
24 None of these meetings, I must add, were reported to the then Vice-Principal of the
25 University, Professor Schreiner - not because he wouldn't have been sympathetic (I'm
26 sure he would have been) but I didn't want to put him into the position of officially
27 knowing about them, so that he would have had to either officially sanction them or not
28 sanction them...

29 R: Yes quite...

30 C: And I thought the best way of letting him off the hook, as far as I was concerned, was not
31
32
33
34
35
36

- 1 to tell him...
- 2
- 3 R: ...not to say anything..
- 4
- 5 C: But I think it has to be said, as part of the history of the University, that the UDF kept
6 going in the Natal Midlands because of the University. It offered, largely unwittingly, a
7 venue...
- 8
- 9 R: Very nice too, very nice too..
- 10
- 11 C: One other thing I would talk about, in the last years of the 1980s, is that I found myself
12 invited rather mysteriously to join a body which was called CDS (everything of course
13 had acronyms); CDS meant the Centre for Development Studies. Now what that title
14 meant I wasn't sure to start with, and indeed I never became fully sure. The body had
15 about it an interesting air of mystery. I suddenly got some faxes, at the University - at the
16 English Department - asking if I could go to a meeting in Pretoria, and these faxes came
17 from a person whom I had never heard of - a lawyer whose name was Matholi Mosheka:
18 he was a person who was later to become, briefly, the Premier of Gauteng. He asked if I
19 could go to these meetings, but I just didn't know what they were. So I remember
20 'phoning him up and asking him about these meetings that he wanted me to go to. He
21 assured me that my name had been put forward by Michael Sutcliffe, who is now an
22 ANC member of the Provincial Legislature here, and that he had thought I would be quite
23 a useful person to join this body - whatever it was. So I went to the meeting in Pretoria,
24 and there I met quite an interesting group of people, people some of whom I had only
25 vaguely heard of then but who have become quite well known since. There was Jakes
26 Gerwel, who was then...
- 27
- 28 R: Yes - with the University of Durban-Westville?
- 29
- 30 C: A lecturer at the University of the Western Cape, and is now of course the personal
31 secretary, the advisor, to Nelson Mandela. There was the Cape Town lawyer Dullah
32 Omar, who is now the Minister of Justice. There was Barbara Masekela, who I think is
33 now the South African Ambassador in Paris. Quite a lot of interesting people and - sorry
34 - Barbara Masekela joined a bit later: she wasn't there on that occasion.
- 35
- 36 R: She would still be in exile possibly...
- 37
- 38 C: ...She was still in exile, yes; she came along to the meetings when we continued to meet

1 after 1990. What I realised after a while was that this thing was really a kind of left-
2 wing think-tank. In fact it soon became clear that it was really an ANC think-tank,
3 working within the country together with the UDF, and trying to devise ways of doing
4 things once the ANC came back. And we did indeed go together to a meeting in Lusaka,
5 early in 1990 - so that in fact I went to Lusaka twice ...

6
7 R: This would be before the speech on the 2nd of February?

8
9 C: No, it was after the speech. I went there at just about the time when people in Lusaka - in
10 fact I think it may have been as late as March 1990, because I know that some of the
11 ANC people in Lusaka had already come back by the time we went there... But it was
12 fairly interesting to be involved with these people, with the whole body...One of the
13 things I remember we spent some time talking about was the exact way in which the
14 ANC would take over from the UDF - what was the UDF do. There was a feeling that the
15 UDF might continue as a body with certain functions. In fact that didn't work out. Once
16 the ANC took over the UDF more or less withered away. But simply the way of carrying
17 out that transition was something that hadn't been thought out fully before then, and there
18 was obviously some anxiety that people who were prominent in the UDF might have
19 difficulties in adjusting to people who were in the ANC. And eventually - eventually, as
20 we know - that merger was managed... Okay, now the last thing I want to say about the
21 pre-1990 period was that. I think it was early October, 1989, the government suddenly
22 announced that it was going to release six or eight high-profile liberation movement
23 prisoners: one of these was Walter Sisulu, and I think it was Ahmed Kathrada, and four
24 others. We can see now that it was a trial run for the release of Nelson Mandela...

25
26 R: Yes, of course..

27
28 C: ... and we in the UDF and the Liberation Movement were told that there would be this
29 huge gathering at the Football Stadium just outside Soweto, and we had to try and get out
30 there if we could. It was all very hurried, as Liberation Movement things always are: you
31 know you're told on Thursday afternoon that something's happening on Friday morning.
32 In this case we were told that this meeting was taking place, and shortly after we were
33 told that a group of people would be going up by plane, and I somehow got selected for
34 this group, and we went along to Durban airport and it was all very chaotic. Tickets were

1 handed out to us in a very casual way, and I remember the ticket I had clearly said
2 'Mrs Padayachee'. And as I went up to give it in - you know you've got your boarding
3 card, and as I walked to the place where you hand in your boarding card and I had the
4 name 'Mrs Padayachee' on it - I thought ' I wonder if they're going to ask the question
5 whether it isn't ...'

6
7 R: They didn't then?

8
9 C: ...They obviously knew this was one of the Liberation people, so it was quite interesting
10 that I was able to get up to Johannesburg, claiming to be Mrs Padayachee... And we got
11 to this huge stadium, and a very big crowd was there. And I felt immediately 'This is an
12 important moment in South Africa's history'... So there was this huge crowd. It must
13 have been forty thousand people, and people were waving ANC banners quite openly,
14 and there were the released people who spoke to the crowd. Marvellous. One of the
15 things I admired was this wonderful public address system, whereby someone like
16 Ahmed Kathadra could speak almost in a whisper...

17
18 R: ...and could be heard?...

19
20 C: ... And all could hear. Everything he said was so beautifully clear. And I remember
21 thinking at the time that the way to carry out a political event, or the way to carry out a
22 revolution in the late twentieth century, is to have a good public address system...

23
24 R: I think you're absolutely right..

25
26 C: Because if the public address system hadn't been good, it wouldn't have worked. The
27 whole meeting would have been a failure. But this huge gathering... And it was
28 obviously an ANC gathering: the people waving ANC banners. The whole place was
29 surrounded by police, so that when we came to move away we weren't quite sure what
30 ball game we were playing: were these police protecting us, or were they going to beat us
31 up as we left? We felt fairly confident about the last point, because there were so many of
32 us that the police would obviously have lost. But no: the police watched us. People
33 walked past them waving ANC flags, and they didn't turn a hair; and in dispersing there
34 was no incident of any sort. I remember saying when I got back to 'Maritzburg, 'The
35 ANC is unbanned already'. To have had such a huge ANC gathering and for the police
36 just to have watched it meant really that things had happened. Now that was October

1 1989. And so for that reason - when was it? November, December, January - when
2 just over three months later FW De Klerk made his momentous speech, unbanning the
3 ANC and the Liberation Movements. I was less flabbergasted than most other people
4 were, because I had been saying for three months: 'The ANC is unbanned.'

5 ;
6
7 R: Of course, of course...

8
9 C: So really he was just formalising and legalising what had become a de facto reality... Let
10 me make a little tribute to FW De Klerk and to the government of this time. They really
11 did manage this quite sensibly. I think that event in the Soweto Soccer Stadium was, as I
12 have said, a trial run. They knew they were going to have to unban the ANC. They
13 thought they would allow an event of this sort, to see what happened. They told the police
14 to allow everything, as long as it wasn't violent or obviously illegal, and the whole thing
15 passed off successfully...

16 R: (They speak at once so that neither is audible.)

17 C: Yes: I think that was a sort of forerunner to the unbanning of the ANC and other
18 organisations, the release of Mandela, the movement towards negotiations, and the
19 election - though we all know there were some very nasty isolated incidents. But on the
20 whole it went off quite well.

21
22 R: Colin, could you now tell us what happened after the 2nd of February 1990.

23 C: Yes, well of course I will give a quick run-through of the events in my own life,
24 my own experience. I and a number of my left-wing friends took the first opportunity
25 that we could find to join the ANC. We did it I think a few weeks after the ANC was
26 officially unbanned. The ANC of course had a tremendous job to get itself organized, to
27 unite the three main streams of the ANC - which were those who had been in the country
28 and members of the UDF, those who had been in jail (both those who had been detained
29 as members of the UDF and those like Nelson Mandela and many others who had been
30 on Robben Island), and thirdly those who had been in exile - either in Lusaka or in
31 different countries, in America or wherever else. So the ANC was a very interesting,
32 lively but chaotic organization. Indeed I have to say that the ANC has remained in many
33 ways a fairly chaotic organisation and, as I said, there are so many people in it - so many
34 different experiences, so many different agendas - that it is quite a difficult body to keep

1 controlled and organised. We rapidly set up a branch of the ANC: the
2 Pietermaritzburg Central Areas branch, which was to start with largely white people - so
3 the white liberals - liberals and radicals - found themselves meeting as an ANC group.
4 Meanwhile of course ANC branches were starting up all over - at Edendale, and indeed
5 all over South Africa. One of the interesting things that the Central Areas branch did -
6 because it had money, because it had a bit of clout - was that we decided that we would
7 host a number of meetings in the Pietermaritzburg City Hall over the next few years. I
8 was asked to chair these meetings on each occasion that a speaker spoke to City hall
9 audiences. Thabo Mbeki came and spoke, Chris Hani spoke, Kadar Asmal spoke, I can't
10 remember them all: a number of important national figures came and spoke in
11 Pietermaritzburg. There was a tremendous enthusiasm in the early 1990s but that wore
12 off to some extent; I mean enthusiasm will always wear off to some extent. The
13 negotiation period dragged on. One of the problems of trying to work at the local level
14 within the ANC was that so much was by now appearing on television and radio about
15 what was going on - about the negotiations, about the ANC and the National Party - that
16 one couldn't help feeling that what we were doing at the local level was pretty trivial. I
17 remember once saying: 'People come to our meetings, but if they really want to know
18 what's happening in the ANC they'll stay at home and watch the news.' So there was a
19 bit of a difficulty there at working on the local level when all the big stuff was going on
20 elsewhere. In September 1993 - about six months before the elections - the *Natal*
21 *Witness*, the then Editor of the *Natal Witness*, David Willers, asked me if I would like to
22 write a fortnightly column for the *Natal Witness*, from an ANC point of view. He asked
23 this I think partly because he had earlier asked a person called Duncan Du Bois - quite a
24 well known local right winger - to write a fortnightly column, and I suppose this was an
25 attempt to balance things out a bit. But I discussed the matter with fellow ANC people
26 and asked them if they were happy about it, and they all said 'Yes, go for it.' So I started
27 writing and I have continued to write, right up to the present. I happened to notice
28 yesterday that the article that came out in yesterday's paper was my one hundred and
29 twenty-fifth: so it's been going on for a long time, and I have to say that I have found it
30 pleasant and useful to have this fortnightly column. It doesn't usually take me very long

1 to write it. A large number of new things have been happening of course in the South
2 Africa of the 1990s and I have found it useful and quite cathartic to have a chance to
3 work out my reactions to the various events that are going on and indeed to publish what I
4 have been thinking. I spent a year or two as chairperson of the ANC - the Central Areas
5 branch. I also went to meetings of various kinds, but I suppose the two events that I
6 should say something about were of course, first, the great first general election in April
7 1994, which was momentous in Pietermaritzburg, as it was throughout the country. I can
8 mention the fact that I had three children overseas at the time - one in Australia and two
9 in England - and they all voted: they all voted before I got a chance to vote, the day
10 before, and voted ANC I'm sure. The other thing to talk about briefly is the local
11 government elections, which in KwaZulu-Natal took place about six months or so later
12 than they did in other parts of the country. I was asked if I would be on the ANC
13 proportional representation list. In the Local Government setup sixty percent of the seats
14 go to wards or rather to Councillors who represent specific wards, forty percent of the
15 seats go to people on the proportional representation list, and so in Pietermaritzburg there
16 are sixty seats - thirty-six ward councillors, twenty-four that have proportional
17 representation. I was asked if I would be on the ANC list; I said Yes I would. I had
18 discussed the matter with the university - with David Maughan Brown, the Vice-
19 Principal, and with my head of Department, by then Anton Van der Hoven, and they had
20 no objection to my going into the City Council. In fact to my surprise Professor Maughan
21 Brown thought that it was a very good thing for university people to get onto the City
22 Council, but I didn't think I was very likely to get on, because I appeared as the
23 fourteenth person on the ANC list. I was confident in fact that I wouldn't get on - I
24 explained to people how it was impossible that I could get on - but the ANC got so many
25 votes in Pietermaritzburg that they went right down to number fourteen on the
26 proportional representation list, so to my surprise I found myself on June the 26th, my
27 birthday, 1996, my sixty-second birthday, becoming a member of the
28 Pietermaritzburg/Msunduzi Transitional Local Council. That has taken quite a lot of my
29 time since then. For the year and a half in which I continued to teach it was very tough
30 going, being a Councillor as well as a Professor of English. This year I have had more

1 time for Council work and I have found myself chairing three Council sub-committees
2 which have taken up quite a lot of my time, but it has been on the whole interesting and,
3 as far as I can judge, valuable work.

4
5 R: Colin, you were on the TLC for a while before you retired, but what interests me
6 is the change in the University itself: the last few years compared with the protesting of
7 the 1960s and 1970s.

8
9 C: Yes, well, indeed the University is now a very different kind of institution from
10 what it was in the first ten years or so in which I taught there, the first twenty years that I
11 taught there. In those days the university was forced by government legislation to be an
12 almost entirely white institution: the students we had were whites; their view of the
13 political situation was a white person's view. Many students were of course to the left, or
14 perhaps not many - but a fair number of the more articulate students were towards the
15 left-liberal end of the spectrum, so there was a lot of often very valuable and creative
16 protest politics. But from 1983 onwards, when the University was allowed to open its
17 doors to every race, a transformation of the student body - a transformation of the
18 intellectual life of the institution began. Old-fashioned rather conservative whites would
19 sometimes ask: 'Haven't standards dropped now that you have so many Black students
20 who have English as a second language?' My answer to that would be that in some
21 respects yes: in written language standards have dropped a little, or they have dropped in
22 the sense that we allow certain roughnesses of language which we wouldn't normally
23 have accepted twenty or thirty years ago. But in fact that slight variation of standard
24 exists really only near the pass level; further up the hierarchy of marks - when you get to
25 the second class, upper second, first class - there has been no changes in standards at all.
26 But the more important point to make is that the university has become a much richer and
27 more interesting institution since it has come to welcome the whole population of the
28 country, and as a person who has for many years run seminar tutorial discussions, I have
29 to recall that these discussions became much more interesting in the 1980s and the 1990s,
30 because the variety of viewpoints that were expressed was simply much greater than it
31 had been before. In the 1960s one could often predict the kinds of views that you would
32 get from a group of students, whereas I found in the 1980s I was often completely taken

1 by surprise by some of the things that students would say. These statements that took
2 one by surprise were sometimes, obviously, well off the mark - there would be people
3 that were way off the mark, but they were often interesting for all kinds of reasons - but
4 certainly other statements were original in significant ways. I certainly found that I was
5 learning from the students in a way that I hadn't done in the previous decades, and I
6 would say that a white South African student, passing through the Faculty of Arts or the
7 Faculty of Humanities in the mid or late 1980s, was getting a far fuller, deeper and more
8 challenging education than any that the university could offer in the 1960s. So I like to
9 stress in a way that the university has grown from the change, whereas conservative
10 white people have got this myth that the university has suffered after somehow going
11 downhill as a result of the introduction of a large number of students who are obviously
12 not as fully prepared for some aspects of university education as they would have been if
13 they had been able to have a better education at school. That, as I see it, is all part of the
14 interesting, fascinating challenge of South African life in the mid 1990s.

15
16 R: And we have on this campus, a great number of white and Indian and black
17 students: we have this good mix. Now how do they mix among themselves, or do they
18 stick in their own categories? What would you say?

19 C: It's an interesting thing. In classes, people tend to sit together - people of the
20 same group. But people join in discussions quite freely: there's good intellectual
21 interchange between people of different groups; there is always, as far as I can see, no
22 awkwardness or embarrassment. There's no sense that somebody has more right to speak
23 than anybody else has: there's a perfect understanding of democratic open discussion.
24 When students leave the lecture halls they will often again be talking to one another and
25 to people of different backgrounds. But once they've moved away from the lecture halls,
26 they tend on the whole - although this is changing now a little - they tend on the whole to
27 mix with people of a similar background.

28
29 (End of second side).