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Tor Sellström: As founder and director of the Institute for a Democratic Alternative in South Africa (IDASA), you have been a recipient of Nordic anti-apartheid support. What was the background to the support?

Alex Boraine: Let me start with the time when I was a member of parliament. I was there from 1974 to 1986. One of the laws at that time was that a political party could not receive financial assistance from abroad. Any support that we received as an opposition party was in the nature of encouragement, solidarity, invitations to speak at a conference or whatever. That was through the Liberal International and as a result we worked much more closely with the German foundations than with the Nordic countries.

I think that the Nordics were extremely suspicious of white liberals. At that time, my impression was that the Nordic people only saw the possibility of ANC overthrowing the regime. It was fairly simplistic. There was a feeling that they did not want to assist anybody inside South Africa. Only those outside were the heroes. The people in exile. I can well understand how they reached that conclusion, but I think that it was unfortunate, because it meant that a lot of people who were trying to undermine apartheid from inside—much closer and in some ways under more difficult conditions—were discouraged from trying to get assistance.

TS: Considering that it was around the liberal centre, at least in Sweden, that the anti-apartheid opinion originally began that appears contradictory.

AB: Right. That is why I think that it in some ways was a fairly simplistic line to take. The

ambiguities and contradictions inside South Africa and the South African struggle were not as evident as I thought that they might have seemed. I think that one of the reasons for that is that very few people from the Nordic countries actually came to South Africa during that particular period of time. It was almost impossible for them to come. They were kept out. They were not given visas. Funny enough, Denmark for example, refused to send an embassy official. Norway was actually acting for Denmark. Now, how you analyze your strategy without being on the spot defeats me. I tried to make that point as strongly as I could and I was very delighted when, finally, Peter Brückner from Denmark came to South Africa as its ambassador. He did a superb job in a very short space of time. He began to assess where people were really making a difference and needed encouragement.

I only really started to visit the Nordic countries when I left parliament. Before that we had visitors, for example, from the Liberal Party of Sweden. A number of them came and a number of them were very forthright. I remember one particular evening when they said that the best thing that Sweden could do was to provide arms to ANC, which shocked a lot of my colleagues. It was said by a member of parliament, who later became a minister in Sweden.

TS: From the Liberal Party?

AB: Yes. He has since changed his mind. We criticized him quite strongly, but agreed with the strong rejection of apartheid. Not the manner of support.

It was also very difficult to support the Nordic commitment publicly, because the

government misused that to such an extent. It used isolated illustrations of how hostile the Nordic countries were. How they wanted to overrun the country and what about the Communists, etc. That sort of things.

TS: There was an editorial in *The Citizen* saying 'Sweden go to Hell!'

AB: Yes, it worked up feelings very strongly. It made it difficult for an opposition party which was forced to deal with white politics. At the time, there were no blacks in parliament. No black constituencies in a sense. Saying that we must end apartheid, you had to be extremely wise and sensitive about what you could and what you could not do. However, when I left parliament in 1986 it freed me to take a much more open stance. That is also why I left. I felt that the constrictions of the official party system made it very difficult to take a really tough stand. I also thought that it was necessary for some whites who had the status, the protection and the opportunity to sacrifice that, break away and be with those who were saying the same things, but who were very strongly punished and sometimes tortured, jailed, driven out or underground. IDASA was just an idea. We had no money; no staff and no programme. It was our discussions with black leaders outside and inside South Africa that made us feel that we needed to start some vehicle for democracy. So we called it the Institute for a Democratic Alternative in South Africa.

TS: I understand that the first person you talked to about IDASA was the Norwegian consul Bjarne Lindstrøm?

AB: Yes. He had just arrived. He could not understand why somebody would just walk out of parliament. You normally resign, lose an election or retire, but you do not walk out. He met me at a function and said: 'I am intrigued. Could we not meet sometime?' I said: 'Sure.'

TS: Was this in Cape Town?

AB: It was in Cape Town. He was based here. I had lunch with him and I told him more or less what I have been telling you. He said: 'How on earth are you going to get this going?' I said: 'I have not the slightest idea, but if it is right, it will work. I am going to pursue this.' The first thing that I really wanted to do—this was a week after I walked out of parliament—was to try to travel around the country and consult the blacks. He then said: 'Well,

let me give you some money to enable you to do that.' It was ten thousand Rands, I remember it well. It was very awkward, because I was very sensitive about how to look after other people's money. I really could not put it into my account. I had no organization. I went to my bank manager and opened another account with that amount of money. My colleague van Zyl Slabbert and I—both of us—had to sign every cheque. So, then we travelled and we listened and we consulted. We started the institute and I reported back to Bjarne Lindstrøm. He said: 'Well, what I think you should do is to visit Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden.' I said: 'That is fine, but it is a long way. I have no guarantee that they will help.'

TS: You had no connections in the Nordic countries?

AB: No connections at all. The only ones that I had met were fairly hostile, as I said. Even lukewarm towards so-called white liberals. But I could really understand that. Lindstrøm said: 'I will send a message ahead and we will buy you two plane tickets to go there. You can visit the four countries in six days.' I must say that the reception was not entirely warm. There were some, particularly in Sweden, who did not believe that we had met ANC. But we had. I had actually gone to Lusaka and I had met Thabo Mbeki. I said to him: 'You must understand that if we are going to get support from people who normally have been supporting you, there will be those who will say: Are you going to take money away from us? I will ask for additional funding so that no one suffers. Secondly, Thabo, you must tell me whether you think that there is any point in internal opposition or whether it is only external?' He said: 'That is nonsense. The two must work together. If they ask us, we will tell them to support you. But if we think that you are not doing what is right, then we will tell them to stop supporting you.'

So we went to the Nordic countries and met the Foreign Ministers. It was at that level for about half an hour. Very nice. But the real discussions took place with officials from the ministries, SIDA, DanChurchAid and the trade unions. They were very tough. They had declared boycotts and felt perhaps that what we were saying was that sanctions did not work and that we therefore should do something

else. I said: 'No, both external and internal pressures.'

TS: Did you also go to Finland?

AB: Yes, I went to Finland as well. After some delay, which is inevitable—they had to consult, talk to each other, talk to ANC and that sort of thing—they gave us an initial grant for one year, which was enough to start one office, for some travel, some workshops and a major conference on democracy, which we held in Port Elizabeth. Even the comrades from the townships came. Then we started the work. And because we were able, I think, to deliver and because more and more people started to get interested and supported what we were doing, the Nordic countries renewed the amount of money. In fact, they gave more.

TS: Who gave you this financial support?

AB: Denmark, Sweden, Norway and a much smaller amount from Finland, which is understandable. What I am very thrilled about is that as a direct result of our initiative, the Nordic countries were forced to ask some very tough questions, such as: 'Should there not be a more multiple strategy, and if so, who should we assist?' Well, there were the trade unions, the churches and organizations like IDASA. More and more, we developed the idea and in 1987 we went to Senegal and met the ANC top leadership, led by Thabo Mbeki. That was supported by the Nordic countries. Not only by them, but principally by them. Funny enough, the Swiss government also supported the initiative. They actually paid for the hotel. They told their ambassador to pay the account for ANC and for the people who came from inside South Africa. That was a great help.

The South African government's reaction to the Dakar meeting was very strong. They threatened to close us down and to take away our passports. We had all sorts of death threats. All kinds of stupid things took place. P.W. Botha made a speech for more than an hour in parliament, criticizing us. It, however, helped us enormously in terms of the outside world. They thought that we must be doing something right if P.W. Botha hated us. So the assistance grew. We started to hold workshops and seminars all over the country on a variety of issues. We also started to send teams outside. A women's conference was, for example, held in Harare with women from ANC. There were meetings with lawyers and meetings

with young people. We also had a very fascinating meeting at Victoria Falls with artists, poets and writers from ANC and cultural organizations in South Africa. We tried to discuss the transformation of South Africa at every possible level. It seemed to work quite well.

We also had to ask some tough questions about the role of the Soviet Union, because they were working closely with ANC. We had a conference in Germany with people from Moscow. Top people from the Moscow State University, scholars and politically active people, plus ANC and us from inside South Africa. That was also funded very generously by the Nordic countries. Every year I went back and met the Nordic Foreign Ministers, SIDA and the Liberal Party. The Swedish government decided that they would not give us money directly, but through a partner. They chose the Liberal Party. Denmark chose DanChurchAid as their partner and Norway the Church of Norway. So we began to meet not only people in government—in the ministries or in the trade unions—but quite ordinary people in the NGOs, which was great. It started to cement relationships beyond a cheque, which I was pleased about.

Then the Nordic countries—particularly Norway in this instance—tried very hard to arrange a meeting between key people in South Africa and key people in ANC to start the process of negotiations. That did not quite work out, but it certainly contributed a great deal to the eventual breakthrough. Two ministers in de Klerk's government have told me that without the work of IDASA, de Klerk could never have made his famous speech in 1990. Whether that is true or not, history will tell.

Our major support came from the Nordic countries. IDASA is still getting very substantial support as is the institute that I have started since I left IDASA, the Institute for Justice in Transition, which deals very much with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. I have received fairly substantial support from Sweden, Denmark and Norway.

One of the things that I am doing is to document human rights' violations that have taken place in South Africa since 1960, going through evidence that has been kept by lawyers for human rights, the church, in the cupboard or under the bed, affidavits, reports on

inquests, press-cuttings etc. I am trying to pull all that together, which is a huge job. Sweden has given me the financial assistance to make that possible. That is going to be a huge help to the Truth Commission. I have got skilled volunteers from four different areas, the Eastern Cape, Kwazulu-Natal, Gauteng and the Western Cape. So there are four groups and I have found some money for workers, computers and so on. It has worked very well, indeed. I have held seminars all over South Africa on the Truth Commission, printed pamphlets, organized major conferences and published two books, all of which has been supported in one way or the other by the Nordic countries. So they not only played a very useful and substantial role in the actual liberation process, but even for the consolidation of democracy, dealing with the legacy of the past, which is so vast in this country. In every area of life they continue to assist and my assessment is that they are not stopping their help now that South Africa is supposed to be a free, democratic country. They are saying: 'How can we help it to develop and grow into a really stable society?'

TS: When you had your first contacts with the Nordic countries they were quite lukewarm. They were not interested in supporting white liberals inside South Africa. In retrospect, do you think that the position of the Nordic countries was exclusively in favour of ANC?

AB: I do think that there were those who in their political analysis at one stage gave too much credence to the armed struggle as a possibility for overthrowing the state. I could never see it happening. In fact, I do not think that ANC ever thought that either. There was really never an armed struggle in that sense, as in Zimbabwe or in Namibia. But, having put themselves in that position, I think that there were those in the Nordic countries who personally came very close to ANC and that they were very influential in determining policy. They felt that support to anyone else would be to weaken ANC and to dull the sharp edge of the armed struggle. There were others who, historically, simply did not have any contacts and did not think it possible to do anything very significant here, except perhaps to give some sort of ambulance help.

But people began to debate the issue and we began to explain. We were always interviewed on television and by the newspapers and peo-

ple started to ask questions. They were very receptive. I think that there were many who always had been receptive, but there was a dominant block that took one particular stand. I remember how I just in personal contacts sensed quite a strong resentment. They felt that we were like National Party whites, except that we were more humane. We had been in parliament, which blacks could not. We were privileged. I said: 'All I ask you to do is to think strategically. You do not have to like us. You do not have to agree with everything we say or do. But think strategically: How can we best combine to get rid of apartheid?' I think that there were a lot of people who started to think.

Once the decision was made to give assistance to those inside the country, they were very anxious to get more projects. I think that they thought that we were accountable. We sent reports every three months. We sent audited accounts on a regular basis. I think that there was a feeling that 'we can trust these people; they are delivering'. And ANC supported the efforts. There was a synergy.

TS: And the South African Council of Churches?

AB: Oh yes, it was very supportive as well. Beyers Naudé, who happened to be an old friend of mine, actually sent a letter of support. And when Mr. Mandela was released, he called me to come and see him. He knew what was happening and said: 'Is there anything that I can do to help, because IDASA must continue with its work.' I said: 'Well, it would be very helpful.' Because some people were then saying that the actual work was over and that perhaps we should be dealing on a government-to-government basis. I agree that there ought to be government-to-government cooperation, but I also think that civil society is very important. There is no guarantee that a government will remain just, accountable, responsible and not abuse its power. It happens everywhere. You need civil society for checks and balances. So Nelson Mandela wrote a letter. Well, he did not write the letter. He said: 'You write it. I will sign it.' I wrote a modest letter and he signed it. When I next visited the Nordic countries they said: 'Do you not think that your role is over?' I said: 'Perhaps, but you should read this letter.' They read it and immediately said: 'Well, if Mandela says that we should support you, then, of

course, we must.' So I have felt that the interest has been sustained and actually grown.

TS: Do you think that the Nordic countries have had an influence on ANC when it comes to the political course taken in government?

AB: No doubt. I have no doubt about that. In terms of economics, the whole question of democracy, accountability, the gentle use of power rather than sweeping away everything and demanding total power. I sense that the Nordic countries have possibly been the strongest influence on ANC in making it less of a far left party and more left of centre. I think that it is tremendous. My personal view is that it has been extremely helpful. There is an openness which was not discernible in the early days. I think that the hold of the Communist Party, which was very strong and remains influential, is not nearly as strong as it used to be. There are other forces at work. There is more pragmatism. What can work? How can we create jobs? How can we listen to other people? How can we get the best for our country?

It is remarkable, actually, if you think of the long years and the dreadful suffering under apartheid. We have had a miracle, where people are not looking for revenge, but really to heal the country. We have a long way to go and there are a lot of big problems, inefficiency and inexperience. But that is the legacy of apartheid. That is what it has given to this country. It is going to take a generation to overcome. At the moment, there are fairly major breakdowns, but I do not know how anyone could expect anything else. I am not worried about it. It is a natural, inevitable development and I hope that the Nordic countries will continue to support the ANC-led government, because I think that it deserves it. I think that it would be extremely good for Southern Africa to have not a super power in the region, but a country that is stable, democratic, consistent and which is not going down the tube as lots of countries in Africa have done.