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Tor Sellström: Next to the late President Oliver Tambo, you have had closer contacts with the Nordic governments than anybody else in the ANC leadership. How would you describe the relations between Sweden, the Nordic countries and ANC during the liberation struggle?

Thabo Mbeki: I think that, first of all, the principal input would have been made by Sweden in terms of the definition of the relationship, its purposes and its wider contextualisation. For instance, if you take the question of the legitimacy of the liberation struggle, including the armed struggle. In the eyes of the Western world that was an important question during the 1960s and the 1970s.

What was a liberation struggle? It was a protest movement against oppression and denial of civil rights and all that. As such it must, quite legitimately, be supported. All must join to protest against the abuses. Secondly, it was a welfare cause. The situation against which you are protesting produces victims, so you also extend welfare to them, through scholarships or whatever. Now, the particular role of Sweden—presumably of the Social Democratic Party more broadly, but I think particularly of Olof Palme as it also relates to the war in Vietnam—was to say that the people have got the right and the duty to rebel against oppression and that the concept of emancipation of a people cannot be reduced to a protest movement, but concerns the right to self-determination of small nations. That is something which is legitimate, which is necessary and which must be supported.

There is a second element to this, which is that as part of the recognition of that right to self-determination you support the people who are engaged in the struggle. You do not define what they should be. You might have a debate about what is happening in Vietnam, where some would say that the people were led by Communists and so on. But Olof Palme would say: ‘Sure, I do not like Communists, but once you have said that you recognize the notion of peoples’ right to self-determination you also recognise the right of the people to decide what they think.’ That made a contribution also in terms of the representation of the South African struggle. Solidarity was no longer merely a protest against apartheid, but support for a struggle for liberation.

TS: Olof Palme’s view was very much to try to break up the bipolar world by supporting oppressed peoples, colonized peoples, the people under apartheid, within a non-aligned movement.

TM: Sure. That is the point that I am making. There was an input from Sweden and the rest of the Nordic countries, which said that there was a protest movement, so ‘let us protest against the abuses of the system in South Africa and extend welfare assistance’. But at a certain point it changed. This is how I see it. It changed with the rising to the surface of the notion of the right of peoples to self-determination and therefore their right and duty to fight and to assert that right. As well as the duty of Sweden to support the struggle without seeking to define what the people should be. For instance, if they were fighting for self-determination and independence from the Portuguese, the people might decide to have a normal multi-party democratic system after independence. That is fine. Or they might decide to have a dictatorship of the proletariat. That is also fine: ‘It is your sovereign right to decide that. It is consistent with our opposition to continued Portuguese colonialism. Of course, we will disagree with you. We do not think that it is the right system, but it is your right to decide.’

Those are two important elements. I think that that is what really defined the nature of the interaction between ANC and Sweden, maybe from the mid-1970s onwards. I would not be an authority on the political processes within Sweden, but, as I say, there began to emerge a movement away from protests against apartheid and the concept that ANC was a protest movement to say that we need to remove the system and get rid of it.
Now, once you take the position that here is a system which needs to be removed and that it is the right and duty of the people of South Africa to remove it—as well as our duty to support them—the exercise of that right to self-determination cannot merely stop at ‘We support them in the struggle to remove the system of apartheid.’ You go further to say, ‘but we must respect their sovereign right to define themselves.’ It may be that some of them are ugly, but you cannot turn your back and say that you will not deal with them because they are ugly. It is part of their right to self-determination to be ugly. Or they may decide to take up arms. I might myself be a pacifist and say: ‘I do not like this thing.’ But once I have said that you have a sovereign right to define who you are, if I want to support you I cannot say: ‘I will support you on condition that you construct yourself in the image that I would like.’

This was important from the ANC point of view. The material, humanitarian assistance was very important, but it was that political stance that was critical to the people inside the country and to the people outside the country. For instance, when the issue of the legitimacy of the South African regime arose, with a whole range of implications, somebody like Olof Palme would say that ‘the reason why I support the right of the people of South Africa to fight for their own liberation is that I do not believe that the South African regime is legitimate. We are not protesting against bad things done by an entity which otherwise is legitimate.’ Once you had gone beyond that to say: ‘We do not recognize the legitimacy of this government and the system that it is defending; let us rise against it and get rid of it’, the position of the ANC inside the country and elsewhere radically changed, even in terms of the armed struggle.

For decades a big point of attack against ANC was the whole issue of the armed struggle. However, once you start from the basis of the right of peoples to self-determination it ceases to be a challenge. I think that this really was the critical contribution of Sweden. In the first instance because it was a Western country. There was no problem on the African continent with regard to the right to self-determination and the struggle for independence. Well, in the non-aligned movement in general. But when you got to the Western world, there was a solid view: ‘Yes, indeed, we must protest against apartheid and develop a movement for civil rights. Indeed, we must extend such support as we can to help the victims of apartheid. But in terms of changing the situation in South Africa, well, let us persuade the government to change’. When you said that it cannot be persuaded to change, so let us organize mass demonstrations in the streets, back would come the response that ‘you are making this people more stubborn. The more you challenge them, the more they will defend themselves, so do not do that. We are talking to them’. Then you take up arms and you are called a terrorist...

You had a Western world which was stuck in a particular position. When you said: ‘I would like to talk to the British government about South Africa, about sanctions, about all sorts of things,’ they would say: ‘Why must we meet you? If you want to come and discuss scholarships for some of your people who are refugees or maybe for some of your young people inside South Africa, sure, let us meet.’ When you said: ‘No, let us meet to discuss sanctions against apartheid in South Africa’, they would say: ‘No, that is not the way to move the South African government. The way to move the South African government is to engage them. We do not want sanctions, because with sanctions they will put their backs up’. So, the particular approach by Sweden was a critical contribution in my perception.

**TS:** Did it create space for you to work towards other Western governments?

**TM:** The position of Sweden created more space than the African or non-aligned position. It created space for ANC to be able to deal with the rest of the Western world. And not just the Western world, but even with regard to the Eastern world and the relationship of ANC with those countries. For instance, the first time the President of the ANC met the General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union was when Gorbachev became General Secretary. Before that, the highest official of the Communist Party that received ANC would be the Secretary for International Affairs of the Central Committee. Again, I think, because of their own understanding. They called you a liberation movement, but they had a conception of that liberation movement as an opposition party. The notion that you could defeat a government that repre-
sent a system and have it replaced by the liberation movement might have been there theoretically. But in practice it was different, whereas Oliver Tambo could go to Sweden and be met by the Prime Minister who understood that he represented a system that must replace the one in power.

**TS:** Already in 1962, I think, Oliver Tambo met the Prime Minister of Sweden.

**TM:** Yes, there was an old connection. My sense of this is that the relationship originated in a particular theoretical and philosophical political position. Then you got the humanitarian assistance. In reality, the humanitarian assistance translated as: ‘OK, here you are—a government-in-waiting as it were—with different portfolios. You have a health portfolio, an education portfolio, a defence portfolio, an intelligence portfolio and so on. We recognize your right to have all those things. However, our own political constraints tie us to support you in regard to the following five portfolios. You had better take care of the other five.’

**TS:** Which would also be the case with assistance to Zambia, Mozambique, Zimbabwe or any independent country.

**TM:** Yes, with any country. Then they would say: ‘As your sovereign right you have decided to embark on armed struggle. We cannot either give or sell you arms, or finance your purchase of weapons, but if you decide to get your weapons in the Soviet Union that is not a condition for a continued relationship and assistance from Sweden. That is your own business.’ What I am saying is that even the humanitarian assistance occurred in that particular context. You might have had some humanitarian assistance during this period from a country like Great Britain, who might say that ‘there are twenty scholarships available for your people and we are ready to give them to you’, but that was of a different kind.

**TS:** In Southern Africa, there was at times a complicated relationship between the independent states, ANC and the Nordic countries. For example, it took many years to establish an ANC office in Harare. How did you see the ANC relationship with the Nordic countries in this context?

**TM:** Again, the starting point was the emancipation of the people. A complication might arise between ANC and the government of Zimbabwe, with whom Sweden wanted to maintain the best of relations. But you could not sacrifice the objective of the emancipation of the people of South Africa simply to maintain good relations with the country hosting ANC, so we had to find a formula around this. It derives from the starting point. If your starting point had been different and Sweden, for instance, had wanted to create a sphere of influence and become important to these countries with regard to Social Democracy and the struggle against Communism or something, then, of course, if complications had appeared between ANC and Zimbabwe it would have said: ‘Look, we cannot afford to lose our influence on Zimbabwe, so cool down ANC! We will talk again after six months.’ But that is a different starting point. I do not think that the popular movement which developed against apartheid in Sweden was predicated on protest.

**TS:** Oliver Tambo always insisted upon continued Nordic support to the BLS countries. At the same time one seriously doubted upon the effects of the assistance to these countries, particularly when it came to their independence vis-à-vis South Africa?

**TM:** Yes, that is true. Now, part of ANC’s capacity to do things and part of the weight that was attached to ANC derived from the weight that it was given by other countries. The Nordic countries were important with regard to more than development assistance in the region of Southern Africa. Also by the nature of their relations, where a Zambia, a Zimbabwe or a Tanzania would not feel threatened or as junior partners, as they would feel vis-à-vis the United States. You had a particular set of relations between the Nordic countries and the countries of Southern Africa. The manner in which ANC was treated by the Nordic countries—not as a welfare and protest movement, but in the way that we are describing, where you would have annual, bilateral negotiations with the ANC as you would have with the Zambian government, for example, and where ANC enjoyed a sort of official status—impacted upon the way that the countries of the region would approach ANC. They would not want to handle ANC in a manner that could upset the allies of ANC, which also happened to be their own allies. It mediated the relationships.