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# UNDERCOVER POLICING INQUIRY – CHRISTABEL GURNEY OBE'S STATEMENT

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**JUSTICE**

PRESS RELEASES

APRIL 29, 2021

TEAM

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**Christabel Gurney OBE today delivered her witness statement, as part of the Undercover Policing Inquiry. See below for a summary of the key points, and her biography.**

You can find the full statement [here](#), and a link to the timings [here](#).

Christabel Gurney, 77, is an activist and historian, who was involved in the Anti-Apartheid Movement.

- From 1969 until 1994, Christabel Gurney was an activist in the Anti-Apartheid Movement
- She was a member of the AAM Executive Committee and the editor of the AAM's monthly newspaper Anti-Apartheid News from 1970 to 1980
- She is currently the secretary of the AAM Archives Committee and a member of the Advisory Council of ACTSA (Action for Southern Africa)
- In 2014 she received an OBE "for political service, particularly to human rights" as a result of her work with the AAM.

**Key points:**

"Although other core participants in the Inquiry were involved in the broader anti-apartheid movement, I believe I am the principal voice of the formal organisation, the Anti-Apartheid Movement, in the Inquiry. Many of my contemporaries are no longer in good health or alive."

**"Indeed, some of the people I worked with from the South African liberation movements were attacked and murdered by the South African government. Some of them were spied on by British undercover police officers and are named in the Inquiry's evidence. I feel an obligation to speak for them."**

"There is an important general point about the anti-apartheid campaigners that I would like to emphasise, because it reveals how misguided and intensely politicised the use of undercover policing was. Given that some of the events the Inquiry is examining took place over 50 years ago, it is easy to forget how different the world was then. Southern Africa was governed by totalitarian and repressive regimes. Some were colonial; some, including South Africa, were constitutionally racist, with white supremacy and mistreatment of African people at their heart."

“The AAM and the wider movement sought to challenge this by espousing conventional campaign tactics and civil disobedience. It seems many have forgotten how our campaigns for basic human rights and equality for people in Southern Africa were vilified and attacked by both state and private interests in the Southern African region and in the West. It is also important to remember that the British government itself was often a vocal opponent of our goals and of our support for African leaders like Nelson Mandela. It deployed the tools of the state, including policing, against us. This was a wrong and politicised misuse of the tools of the state, and it is something I hope this Inquiry will examine and condemn.”

“Western nations, including successive UK governments, supported the status quo in Southern Africa. International companies traded with these regimes, banks funded them, commercial interests profited from them. In the Cold War era, the AAM was (wrongly and deliberately) portrayed by its opponents as dominated by communists as a means to discredit it.”

“Propaganda and disruption were tools in a concerted campaign to undermine our morale, effectiveness and credibility. Surveillance, infiltration, intelligence-gathering and intelligence-sharing were an essential part of this strategy. Obviously, much of this was done covertly.”

“This Inquiry would be naïve to assume that undercover policing by Special Branch (‘SB’) was unconnected with this wider and powerful campaign against us. It would be failing in its duty, under its terms of reference as well as its moral and professional responsibility, if it were not thoroughly, fearlessly and openly to investigate what happened.”

**“This is important, not just for uncovering the truth of what happened in the past, but also to learn and apply lessons for the future. For as many malign and powerful influences there are in the world today, there are determined and principled voices who campaign against them. They deserve the protection of the state.”**

“This public inquiry could learn many lessons from South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (‘TRC’) set up after the apartheid South Africa regime was peacefully replaced by a democratically elected ANC government in 1994. But it need not even go that far. **At the very minimum, this Inquiry should let the British people know how its government misused policing tactics on campaigners against racial injustice of the most extreme kind. The UK Government should have been supporting us: instead it was covertly putting us under surveillance, undermining our work and assisting the racist regimes we opposed.**”

“I have been provided with 40 documents by the Inquiry, mainly intelligence reports [by Special Branch and the Special Demonstration Squad of undercover police].”

“They raise serious concerns about the nature and methods of UCO surveillance of the campaigns, events and individuals.”

“I am concerned that the police considered the AAM to be an organisation whose activities should be spied on by UCOs. The AAM’s only purpose was to help bring about the end of apartheid, a system of racial discrimination that was opposed by a large proportion of the UK population at the time and is now universally condemned. The AAM’s activities were always lawful and open.”

“Most of the documents that I have been referred to, particularly those relating to the AAM, report on mainstream law-abiding events, such as public meetings and the presentation of petitions, which posed no threat to public order.”

**“Given all this I am bound to ask: (a) why the British state decided to spy on the AAM in the first place; (b) who made the decision; (c) when the decision was made; (d) having (presumably) established that the AAM was not a ‘subversive’ organisation, why it continued to spy on the AAM and for how long. The inevitable conclusion is that it was spied on not because it was a threat to the UK state (by definition, it was not, its opponent was the racist South African state), but because monitoring the AAM served the UK’s relationship with those against whom the AAM campaigned.”**

“To get to the truth of what happened will require this Inquiry to obtain and make publicly available all relevant documents on this important issue throughout the period of AAM activity, that is, up to the mid-1990s, when the apartheid regime fell and the AAM was disbanded, its objective achieved.”

“The national AAM was always concerned not only about infiltration by groups based in Britain who were hostile to its objectives, but also by attempts to disrupt its activities by the South African security services, such as BOSS.”

“For example, there was a series of break-ins in the 1960s and 1970s, and the theft of membership records from the AAM’s office in the early 1970s. In the 1980s there was an arson attack on the AAM office. In the early morning of 14.3.82 a bomb went off at the ANC’s London headquarters. The incident itself was very serious, an ANC worker was injured and the building was badly damaged.”

“The South African angle of the attack has been investigated by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (‘TRC’), with the benefit of evidence from many of those involved following amnesty applications. Its findings are set out in its report [1]. The bombing was planned and committed by members of the South African Security Branch. It was ‘authorised by the South African government at the highest level’. The raid was undertaken in violation of the territorial sovereignty of the United Kingdom and was also a violation of international law’.”

“In its evidence to the TRC, the AAM raised the possibility that the operation may have been an assassination attempt on the life of the ANC president, Oliver Tambo. Clearly, the South African authorities shared a common interest with the UK’s SB and Special Demonstration Squad’s (‘SDS’) UCOs in events and opponents of apartheid South Africa active in the UK and abroad.”

**“While I do not suggest that the UK had a direct role in the attacks, I note that these individuals and events (and the AAM’s connection with them) also attracted the attention of the UK’s SB and are referred to in the SB reports in the bundle of documents provided to me now and in the public domain .**

**“What is remarkable are the indications that appear to connect the South African authorities to the UK authorities, SB in general and the SDS in particular.”**

“The issues were discussed in Parliament and presumably, therefore, examined in Government and in government departments.

“It is inconceivable that, against this background, the matters were not examined, investigated and reported on (throughout the apartheid years) within the relevant government departments (including the Foreign Office and Home Office) and by the relevant ministers, the police (including SB) and the security services. Records must exist and must be relevant and made public in this Inquiry.”

“I note that a number of the SB reports in my witness bundle are marked ‘Box 500’ . I understand this indicates that the reports were sent by SB to the UK security services, which begs the question what happened to this ‘intelligence’ and these reports thereafter. Did they go on to the South African authorities?”

“What, if any, information did the UK authorities receive in return and what use was this information put to? For example, did it inform the targeting and strategy of SB, the SDS in particular, in relation to the AAM?”

**“SB appear to have expended considerable thought, time and resources in deploying UCOs to spy on the AAM. I have not seen evidence in this Inquiry into undercover policing that those who attacked the anti-apartheid movement were infiltrated by the SDS.**

**Further, little appears to have been done or achieved in investigating and bringing to justice those responsible for serious attacks on the AAM in the UK. Why?**

**Surely it should have been the duty of the British police to protect its own citizens against illegal activities that appeared to have been initiated by a foreign government, rather than exchanging information with representatives of that government.”**

“I trust that this inquiry will examine carefully not only what the SB and SDS reported on, but also how surveillance was conducted, who was responsible and the oversight of these tactics.”

**“Overall, my concerns about the activities of UCOs and the SDS in relation to the AAM and other groups spied on relate to the clearly politicised nature of this form of policing.”**

“In deploying UCOs to spy on the AAM, the SDS entered into the political arena. It was interfering in a political campaign that presented no threat to the British state. The SDS was acting against those campaigning for racial justice in South Africa. It has not taken long for history to judge the merits of the opposing sides in this political dispute.”

**“It should be remembered that the AAM was one of the major campaigns of the second half of the 20th century. It was about racial equality and democracy. It was against fascism and totalitarianism. It campaigned through legitimate methods of lobbying: mass marches, rallies, petitions, concerts, boycotts. It stood against the apartheid South African regime which was brutal in its methods and unconscionable in its justification. That regime was supported for decades by, among others, the UK government and vested private and business interests. The backdrop to all of this was the Cold War when any campaign to change the policies of Western powers or their allies was (wrongly) portrayed as part of a Communist, particularly Soviet, plot.”**

“Many in the struggle for racial equality will be shocked by the steps UCOs took to spy on the movement. They will want to know who authorised this and why. Most importantly, I and others wish to know what lessons can be learned and recommendations made to prevent any repeat of these abuses in the future.”

**For further information, please contact:**

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### Timings

- Ernest Rodker’s statement to the Inquiry was read out by his son, Oli Rodker, on Wednesday 28 April at 2pm-5pm.
- Professor Jonathan Rosenhead gave evidence to the Inquiry on Thursday 29 April at 10.30am-1pm.
- Christabel Gurney OBE gave evidence to the Inquiry on Thursday 29 April at 2pm-5pm.
- Lord Peter Hain will give evidence to the Inquiry on Friday 30 April from 10am-5pm.

More information on the AAM memo to the government in 1982 can be found here:

- <https://www.aamarchives.org/archive/campaigns/government/gov19-aam-memorandum-for-meeting-with-the-home-secretary.html>
- <https://www.aamarchives.org/archive/campaigns/government/gov24-memorandum-to-the-home-secretary.html>

