

Interview by Ian Latimer with Dr W F Nkomo

Latimer Could you tell me about your background and beliefs.

Nkomo I have always considered myself a revolutionary in so far I have fought to break the status quo. South Africa as you know is a divided country in which everything is sort of patterned on the race. We have race separation, which today is called separate development but we have always had segregation and races have always lived apart and there has always been a clear division between black and white and there was a kind of 'baasskap', I don't know if you understand that, it is a master servant attitude or relationship between black and white. As a young African it has always been my ambition to break loose from the shackles of what I considered to be the yoke of oppression of the foreigner. We believe rightly or wrongly that Africa is our country - the continent of the Black man and white people who are there have taken what was our birthright and instead of sharing with us they have adopted an attitude of race domination and because of that I grew up with an attitude of hatred and bitterness towards white people and I always hoped for the day when I could fight or lead my people in a struggle to break the shackles of white domination.

Latimer What was your life like as a boy and what was the effect of being in the servant relationship?

Nkomo Well actually it was a life of struggle. We never had it easy. We had a big family. My father happened to be a Methodist clergyman and he didn't receive a large stipend and it was difficult raising a family of eight of us and all of us had the ambition to study and for myself I wanted to reach university levels in my studies. And right from the beginning it was difficult - it meant that I often had to inherit the old clothes of my older brother and do remember going to boarding school – the first time I went I inherited a khaki suit, a big hat and some dragoons with the result that I was called by my fellow students, because I was wearing the dragoons, Poppa Dregs and it was a kind of humiliation which indicated my background and I suppose that is what actuated me to study hard and reach a point at when I could forget the difficulties and the struggle of poverty.

Latimer Your school and your university was only for black people?

Nkomo My first university was for black people, the South African Native College, Fort Hare which was originally started by the Scottish Missionaries of the Presbyterian Church working in close collaboration with other missionaries like Methodist, Congregational and others and it was at that time the only centre, it started in 1916 by Dr Alexander Kerr. He came from Scotland to be the first principle of the college. He worked together with an African Professor DDT Jabavu who had trained in London and in the beginning all non-whites went there including Coloureds and Indians and there were times in the history of Fort Hare when the sons of white missionaries also attended Fort Hare. And when I was there myself, a son of our own missionary, George Cook, did first year sciences with us.

Latimer Was there gaiety in your life at all as a boy?

Nkomo Oh yes, there was always gaiety. I happened to be very humorous and I had the gift of singing and I even used to sing a song; "I scream, you scream, we all scream for ice cream, rar, rar, rar, and I used to make quite a noise with my dragoons at the end of the song which added to the – I think the humour of the music and although people looked down upon me there were some point of admiration perhaps and that my own sense of humour helped me on a great deal in life.

Latimer As a young boy at home, was there any laughter?

Nkomo Oh yes, I think that is one thing about Africans that we are a gay people, we are musical, we laugh, and we laugh through our difficulties and sing through them and even if you have to go to a town like Johannesburg and you find the labourers working hard you find them chanting some rhythmic song to which they do their work and that is usually the spirit. Often people who come to South Africa are misled by our gaiety and they feel we have got no problems whatsoever.

Latimer You were a black boy learning to live and grow up in a large black family and there was gaiety and there was love but there was poverty. Where did the bitterness come, when did you become aware that you had bitterness and the problem of the white supremacy. How did this come about in your mind?

Nkomo Well as I moved ahead with my education, I began to learn more and more of the hardships that were....and the discriminations that were méted out against black people and I began to learn more of the laws that were especially applicable to us because of our colour like the pass laws which we had to carry because we were black and the poll tax which was a special tax paid by the black people, the inequality of the allowances that was paid for the education of the black and white in our country, the disparity of wages and of people with the same qualification and although I went to University I knew that after qualifying I would qualify for the same wages. Actually, I would be regarded almost as a fourth rate citizen because in South Africa you have whites first, and then you have the coloured people and you have Indian people and then you have the black people and in the wage structure in professions also, there is usually that kind of classification and those things weigh heavily with all of us.

Latimer Were there cases of personal humiliation for you as a person?

Nkomo Well the were cases of humiliation for me personally. For instance, in 1938 when I went to get married - I was teaching then in Pretoria - and I was going to get married to a young lady in Port Elizabeth. So there was then what they called Voortrekker celebrations - they had the monument - Voortrekker Monument celebrations in Pretoria and in those day there were no entrenched apartheid and we used the same entrances to the railway stations - but for that week when the celebrations were on there was some apartheid and we were not allowed and we were not allowed to use certain entrances at the railway station although it was not written in black and white. And there was struggle between me and white policemen in which my shirt was actually torn and this embittered me - and actually just before that time I had a refusal of a passport I had applied for to attend the World Peace Congress - Youth Peace Congress which was held in Washington – I

believe the late Mrs Iliana Roosevelt was to be one of the sponsors – one of the speakers at that conference and I was a delegate representing South Africa and I was refused a passport on the grounds that the government did not want to expose me to wrong political influences and that also embittered me because I thought that decision was discrimination against me because of colour.

Latimer By this time you were active a revolutionary were you? What paths have you taken?

Nkomo Well by this time, I was a member of the African National Congress and I had been a delegate to the congress in Natal and also later on to one in Bloemfontein but it was later on as a medical student in 1941 – I became a medical student at the University of Witwatersrand and while I was studying at the Witwatersrand University together with other students and a few other friends we decided to form the African National Congress Youth League. The reason we decided to form this organisation was because we felt that the senior body, the African National Congress had been following constitutional lines - they used to go on deputation or send resolutions and so on- they never broke any laws in the country and we felt that we needed

Latimer I don't understand that - I am sorry.

Nkomo Up to that time they were not following any line which meant breaking any law - in other words everything they did was done along constitutional lines. They went through recognised channels, they went to administration to present their grievances, to Commissioners and to Ministers in Government but they never envisaged civil disobedience or anything like that at that stage.

Passive resistance as we had - We knew about passive resistance because it was started in our country by Mahatma Gandhi but the African National Congress was just doing what was constitutionally right and we felt that they needed to do something dynamic that would shake the authorities and that is the reason why we started the African National Congress Youth League.

Latimer And what happened to them then?

Nkomo Well after the formation of the African National Congress Youth League it does appear that that the African National Congress began to come a more militant body - in any case about that time it was working in unity with the Indian Congress and the African People's Organisation which is the only body representing the Coloured people and there were campaigns like the anti-pass campaign which were for the first time campaigns of a more militant nature and then afterwards the were the defiance of unjust laws and I believe the campaign was also largely started because of the spirit – the unrest in the minds and the young people.

Latimer And at this time you were....

Nkomo Up to this time I was still actively involved with the African National Congress. It was only later on that I ceased to carry on. What happened was that later on in 1953 I met Moral Re-Armament and attended an assembly of Moral Re-Armament

in what was then Lusaka in Northern Rhodesia before independence - before it was called Zambia and we went to that conference together with Afrikaners from South Africa and it was because of the change I had found in a radical nationalistic young Afrikaners which made me feel there was a way of dealing with the situation, that if we could find change in people it was better to work along those lines rather than to plan the liquidation of people.

Latimer How did this come about? You were a bitter man

Nkomo Yes, as a result of the apology of the Afrikaners to me for their former attitude of arrogance I began to look at my own life and realised that I had based my life on bitterness and hatred and that I had fanned the flames of hate in the hearts of young Africans. And so I decided to apologise for my former attitude and to decide to work on a new basis free of bitterness and hatred and try too, the idea of listening to God's guidance. And living out moral standards. That led to my coming Caux later that year and here at Caux I even decided to get rid of my beard which I have always considered as one of my special indications of nationalism - I shaved it here and after I had shaved it I felt that I had shed the last trace of bitterness and hate and I begun to accept white people and people of other races on a different level and decided that I would work with them now for remaking the world on a basis of unity together with them. I returned home and said publicly what I had found and it was claimed that I misrepresented the stand of the African National Congress because in my speeches I had said that I had stood for bloodshed at one stage and that I was now denouncing that kind of stand and the people in the Congress felt that they had never decided to follow the line of bloodshed and that I had.... because I had misrepresented them I was publicly expelled from the African National Congress so that I remained in spirit united with them but I could not physically continue to join in the struggle.

Latimer Is that still the case today?

Nkomo Well the position today is that the African National Congress is a banned organisation so that we don't have any political bodies operating in South Africa. Now I happen to be one of the few people who can still speak because I don't speak any more from the platform of the ANC but as one who has found a new basis of fighting for the future and on that basis I have not been refused a platform, at least I have been allowed free expression of my views in South Africa.

Latimer What happened to your feelings when you changed?

Nkomo Well all I can say is that whereas I had been very bitter and full of hatred and felt that as I stay committed even to a programme of violence and bloodshed, through finding Afrikaners who were changed so that now they were prepared to apologise to black people and tell me where they needed to find change themselves. I decided that I should begin to look at my own life. Now I believe that its difficult for an outsider to realise it, but if you were able to understand some of the feelings of an Afrikaner who belonged to the Broederbond or the Youth league of the Nationalist Party- the white Nationalist Party, he would be a counterpart to the African Youth Leaguer who felt strongly against the other races and for a man with such strong feelings to reach a point where he could shed his bitterness, that was

something which appealed to me and made me have a look at my own life and made me realise that whereas I thought that I was a revolutionary, I was a reactionary in so far as I was not personally involved and had to begin to overall my own life and that led to me finding something different and so I decided to give up my own feelings of hatred and bitterness. I don't know if I convey...

Latimer Talking about being a revolutionary ... you mean it wasn't enough to scream and yell and hit?

Nkomo Yes I think the thing is that I met young revolutionary Afrikaners with race hatred and through Moral Re Armament they had for the first time found a new relationship with black people. Actually it meant that when they came to my home, it was an unusual thing for them.....

Latimer And against the law...

Nkomo Well not actually against the law because the law does not prevent that kind of fellowship except that they have to get a permit to come to our area, but we can go to their areas without a permit. But there is nothing to stop fellowship between the races. But it is not the done thing and for them to have come and then having come to actually apologise publicly, that was the thing - they did it – we had meetings with other Africans and they were not ashamed of publicly declaring their new stand.

Latimer What did they actually say?

Nkomo Well they said that they felt that they had been wrong to adopt an attitude of racial superiority to us on the basis of colour and that the correct thing was to find a basis of unity through listening to the voice of God, or if you want to look at it as the voice of conscience and having relations on the basis of not of who is right but of what is right and when they said that, it rang a bell immediately and I began to see that there seemed to be no point in preparing to shed the blood of such people, if I could sit with them and begin to find..er.... to listen to our consciences together to find the right thing to do for the good of our country together and that as they seemed genuine it seemed to me a reactionary for me to maintain the old stand.

Latimer Ah! I understand. This as a new sort of...

Nkomo That is the thing.

Latimer You were... They were they revolutionaries.

Nkomo And I was now a reactionary. And then we found this new thing. And actually it worked. Because there were many instances like for instance when my wife died later on, an Afrikaner spoke and he shed some tears at the funeral of my wife and he said he never thought he could weep at the funeral of a black women. Now that was real - it was not a thing that was expected of people who were working out policies of separation and who felt that God had made them superior people and who sometimes were inclined to think we did not have any feelings.

Latimer So you'd crossed this line and you lost your bitterness. What happened to you then?

Nkomo Well then that released I think a new power which I considered to be a new statesmanship and it made me live out a new dimension of the thing I'd been talking about, because whereas I was fighting just for my people, now I was able to fight together with the Afrikaners for the remaking of South Africa for all of us and my programme was no longer a sectional programme for the good of black people but a wider programme which included all people. And, well, I could put it in the words of another friend of mine who said: "I dedicate my life to fight just as hard for the future of the white children as I do for the future of my children." Now that was not a thing which one expected from a black person, or from a white person.

Latimer For how many years is it now that you have been fighting for this revolution?

Nkomo Well this is since 1953 that I have been fighting this and since that time I have been able to move in many parts of the world. It has brought me connections which I had never thought of. It has made me meet people from different parts of the world and today I have even met Nationalists from Papua New Guinea who fighting also for their liberation and I am no longer just interested in the welfare of my country. I am thinking of my country's relations with the countries of the world, which is I think a new thing. And one thing about South Africa, us South Africans, black and white, is that we tend to be parochial and to think just within - not beyond our frontiers, but this is something that is lifting us beyond that and being carried outside our own surroundings, we are able to see our country and to see its mistakes in a different way and to react even to criticism differently from the people who don't want to look and think big. Because when you begin to think big you begin to realize that your business is also the next man's business and that he has got as much right to look into your affairs as you have to look into his. And so that we cease to be as touchy about the opinion of other people regarding our policies, as we would have been otherwise.

Latimer But the situation as one reads about is really bad isn't it and seems to getting worse.

Nkomo Well I don't know that one could say it is getting worse. All I could say is that separate development as a policy has been further entrenched to this extent that the Bantustans or the governments of the African have become an accepted fact and that they are developing to a point where they will soon be fully independent but the question of repatriating all black people to the so-called home lands is now a question which is engaging the thinking of the people in South Africa and the interest of the other races are beginning to loom high so that there is a greater flexibility about policies and other things I think and that there isn't that granite attitude to policies which was the case a few years ago and then there is this outward policy which led even to the visit of Dr Hastings Banda and in his five days in South Africa a barricade was virtually lifted for those days.

Latimer Was that visit of enormous significance to you?

Nkomo I think it has of very great significance because both white people and black people witnessed this thing happening and it's the sort of thing which is accepted in the South African way of life that black people should not dine with white people but at this time all those feelings were forgotten and Mr Vorster himself sat between black women from Malawi and even the papers in South Africa did not make a noise about that kind of thing. It just went naturally and I believe that both black and white can never think exactly the same after what they witnessed in those days and Dr Banda did not compromise on his attitude to apartheid – he told South Africans that he is not impressed by the policy of apartheid and he does not subscribe to it. But that doesn't mean he is an enemy of the people as such.

Latimer Is there more cause for bitterness now than when you were a boy?

Nkomo Well for some there are two sides to the whole question because many youngsters who were born since this government took over haven't known anything else so they've come to accept the position as normal for our way of life and for many of them things seem to be proceeding quite normally and there are many of them who are accepting it freely without any bitterness or hatred. On the other hand there are many young Africans who are beginning to think and actually, what maybe unfortunate is that young intellectual Africans have reached the point of where they speak of the whites. There was a point for instance when we were following a multiracial line and then now we have turned away from multi-racialism to this pattern of separate development and we have had liberals who had fought for liberalism in our country. Today the young intellectuals are rejecting white liberals and they say to them what they should do is to change other whites and not to come and work with them whereas there was a time when they were acceptable. That is why the South African Student's Organisation which is an African Student's organisation and does want to affiliate to the National Union of South African Students in Nusas because Nusas is a liberal multiracial organisation. They have got nothing against them but they feel that as liberals they should fight to change whites. And now the point is that when you start having this kind of separation, it is easy to get a thinking which may become backward and racial again and divisive which is an unfortunate development and one has hoped that amongst the intellectuals would begin to find unity again but unfortunately under separate development the pattern of separation has gone so far that it goes even into cultural bodies; even an organisation of the artists has to divide itself into an organisation of white artists Indian artists, Coloured artists and African artists, and teachers organisations and other organisations and so on, and student bodies who also have to follow the same lines and the result is that you begin to hear people talking of rejecting some groups and one is a bit afraid of what that might lead to.

Latimer What is your hope?

Nkomo Well I happen to have great hope indeed. Well as a Christian I suppose we always talk of faith, hope and charity and if we didn't have hope then I don't think we'd be able to go on struggling for the future and that is the basis of my struggle that I have hope as a Christian. But as I say, even in addition to that I have even in my own situation been encouraged by the things that I see, by the thinking that is

developing. I have indicated that in South Africa we cannot speak anymore really of whites in a strict lager mentality because you are having many whites who are beginning to question policies and directions and many things which wasn't the case a few years ago under Dr Verwoerd, a leader of the white Nationalist Party, there didn't seem to be much scope for talking, but under Mr Voster there seems to be that there is more flexibility and people hear other opinions. Recently for instance there was the symposium at Potchefstroom University where the Prime Minister himself took part. Now Potchefstroom University is one the conservative South African Universities but at that symposium there was a lot of progressive opinion expressed on many issues and although they may be still conservative so far as my people are concerned they they have taken quite a progressive view so far as the coloured man is concerned and I believe theoretically they feel that they must begin to integrate the coloured man into the white man's way of life and even cut out the discrimination that exists between coloured and white which I think is a good beginning because once that is accepted, they will begin to turn to the other racial groups and see that a square deal is given but even, and the Prime Minister said not so long ago, that no one race could expect to dominate another permanently and those things are engaging the thinking of many people, but apart from that the world is also having it's own thinking and pressure groups from outside are also affecting our thinking in South Africa. For instance, the two large banks in Britain- Barclays Bank and Standard Bank have now accepted the principle of equal pay for equal work. And that is due to pressure from students and other people in Britain and then Polaroid and other American organisations, have also through their pressure led to their and other organisations in South Africa improving wages and other conditions for black people. But the thing that gives me hope is that the Afrikaner politician and Afrikaner economists are almost at variance today because the Afrikaner economist is speaking a more progressive language and he is making more allowances than concessions, realising that there are certain things that must happen if the wheels of the economy must begin – continue to move.

Latimer What could I do to help in this rubble?

Nkomo Yes, that's a very important question I think, because many people have asked us what they should do in the situation in South Africa and there are others who are trying to help by supporting causes of one kind or another, but I believe that the best thing to do is to be as positive as possible to try and befriend South Africa and not to isolate South Africa from the outside world. On the question of sanctions I am inclined to believe that even that is not something that should be pursued too far because in any case it is not working 100% because not (all) countries in the United Nations Organisation are playing the game that some countries withdraw and then others come in. It does appear to me that even on the question of arms for South Africa that Britain strictly took a stand, then France came in to capitalize on the fact that Britain has moved out. I mean there are things like that that seem to be happening but it seems to me that it is better to befriend the people and to influence them gradually through pressurising them and showing them that the better thing to do and if we could get people visiting us in South Africa and having dialogue with us, that I think would be a help much more than trying to squeeze us out of existence which might in any case succeed finally.

Latimer Do you have any bitterness left in you?

Nkomo I always want to feel that I don't have and bitterness left although I have found myself sometimes reacting in a way which made me feel that it is something I need to change on every day, because even looking at the question, we were talking about our fight in a certain area in Africa and then it came to me that we had been ineffective in that area because the whites thought they knew all that should be known in that situation and they sort of acted as all-wise and I felt I expressed my sentiments strongly against that and when I said so it seemed to me that I still felt a bit bitter against white superiority on that point and it became clear to me that I have every day to be on the guard and to see that I change and it seems to me that human nature is something that we have to nurse and to be changing all the time. We can't say we are saints – there are ups and downs but I am trying my best.

Latimer Could you say who you are and where you are from.

Nkomo Oh, I see. Well I come from South Africa. As I said earlier I was one of the founders of the African National Congress Youth League and actually I presided at the inaugural conference of the African National Congress Youth League. That is why some people have preferred to call me the first President of the ANCYL and then I am one of the Vice Presidents of the South African Institute of Race Relations, that is a multiracial organisation in South Africa which has for a long time fought for race relations in the country.

Latimer And your name is?

Nkomo I am William Frederick Nkomo. When you were talking about bitterness (you will be able to edit some of this, will you – okay?) Talking of bitterness, on the 29th April this year I was assaulted by a traffic policeman in Pretoria, South Africa. The result of it was that my eyesight was impaired. Now this I think made me feel embittered once more against white people because in my mind I felt that this traffic policeman might not have behaved the same way if I had been white and then what seemed to aggravate the situation was that when the case was up before the law the presiding magistrate seemed to me to be doing everything to find fault with me and in the end he just said well he found the man guilty but he discharged him of assault and that further embittered me against the system and I remember saying this is one of my.....that that is the kind of thing which embitters black people against whites and against even the system of administration and the courts of law and his answer was we should take it to God and in a fit of bitterness at the moment I said we taken too many things to God and perhaps this we should take to blood and in other words I was again thinking of my old determination to use bloodshed, but I was glad that when I went home and sat down I was able to change my mind about and say oh well I cannot blame the whole of South Africa on this and the whole of the white race on this particularly because I received many telephone calls, many letters from white Afrikaners who told me how their consciences were revulsed by the barbaric nature of the incident and they were hoping that I would soon recover from my injury, anyway, they wanted me to know just what they felt about it, but just the exchange of letters and the telephone calls made me feel hopeful that there were still many people in South Africa who were not prepared to let injustice and the wrongs things go on.

Latimer What happened when you went home?

Nkomo Well I was able to have a quiet time and in my quiet time I think God spoke to me clearly that this was the action of an individual and I shouldn't blame it on a people.

Latimer And that was as clear as that?

Nkomo It was as clear as that. I felt sorry for what I had said to my friend. And I subsequently assured him that I had found victory over my feelings of bitterness in the matter.

Latimer Did God not tell you to go to the policeman and say anything to him?

Nkomo Well I'm afraid I have not had any guidance to go to the policeman as such. It maybe something that will still come.