

Secretary's Report to the A.G.M. 13th December, 2003

A large part of our activity this year has involved developing our links with the South African High Commission, and the related matter of planning and preparing for next year's 10th anniversary of South Africa's 1994 election. In February we were pleased to be heavily involved in a Burns Supper held at the High Commission in London, with a large Scottish contingent and some very bemused South Africans. We believe the creation or strengthening of links between the High Commission staff and a number of leading Scottish figures as well as with ACTSA Scotland itself made the exercise well worth the cost and substantial effort involved. A repeat performance is planned for next year, when we hope to widen the Scottish attendance further. Having a poet in the High Commissioner's post has certainly helped.

Part of the purpose of the Burns Supper was to begin to generate enthusiasm for what was undoubtedly the major event of our year, the High Commission's conference on "South Africa 2004 - A decade of freedom - the decade ahead". Apart from Brian Filling's role in the Conference Working Group, a great deal of time was spent promoting this event, and in the end roughly 40 delegates attended from Scotland, including several who were new contacts for us. All the feedback we have had says that people found the speakers and the conference overall inspirational. We do expect the experience of delegates there to have a strong positive impact on our work in Scotland for next year's anniversary and beyond. Much time has also been spent in planning and preparation for next year's events, which will feature in the Programme of Action later in the meeting, and then presumably in next year's annual report. We are very conscious of the need to build long-term benefits into the year's programme.

The rest of the year's activities followed a more familiar pattern.

Campaigns.

The asbestos compensation claims against Cape plc continued to be important to our campaigning in the early part of the year, with the Royal Bank our principal target in Scotland. The case was finally settled (again), and this time the compensation was actually paid. Although the amount was less than had been agreed the first time round, a separate deal with a different company at about the same time meant additional money for some of the Cape claimants, and the knock-on legal effects for much wider compensation claims against the mining industry generally in South Africa increased the potential significance of this victory dramatically.

Our campaigning this year on the HIV/AIDS/pharmaceuticals issue has mainly been some fairly low-key petitioning to GlaxoSmithKline on patents and to the British Government on the Global Fund. We did also have the opportunity through a meeting arranged by NIDOS (Network of International Development Organisations in Scotland) to put ACTSA's views on the Global Fund to Gareth Thomas, junior minister in the Department for International Development, and reinforce what he had already heard from Aditi Sharma (ACTSA's Head of Campaigns in London). David Kenvyn's continuing involvement with the World Aids Day service in Glasgow ensures that South Africa always features strongly in that event. There have, of course, been some dramatic steps forward on drug patents and prices over the year, so the worldwide campaigning of which we have been a tiny part has certainly moved things on, though obviously that doesn't mean that there isn't much left to do.

On debt, we have kept in touch with Jubilee Scotland and distributed their material, as well as ACTSA's national leaflet on the issue.

On trade, we continued to distribute leaflets and briefing material on the Cotonou negotiations, but ACTSA members were also deeply involved in the wider Trade Justice Movement campaign to lobby M.P.s in their constituencies for justice in world trade as a whole. It was quite striking when looking through the list of constituency co-ordinators to see how many of them were ACTSA members or supporters, wearing a great variety of hats.

Book Appeal.

The container-load dispatched in November last year did reach East London in early 2003. We also sent off a separate consignment of first-aid dummies and other nursing teaching material from Glasgow Caledonian University to the University of Transkei, with which G.C.U. has a long-standing link.

The sorting and packing operation at this end has now settled into our new home at Hillhead Library (still as guests of Glasgow City Council), and books have continued to flow in. Particularly significant help came from Shawlands Rotary Club and Larkhall Council of Churches, as well as the continuing practical help from the Co-operative movement.

Our fairly new link with Glasgow Volunteer Centre has also been productive. We are grateful to all those who have helped in any way.

We still find money for shipping much harder to come by than books, even though the cost of sending a container is tremendous value for the weight and number of books involved.

Women's Delegation.

The 2002 women's delegation had a major input at the STUC's annual Congress in April, and reports have been given to a series of events, including our own annual ANC anniversary social in January. Some information has been put on our website, and a certain amount of money has been raised for projects visited by the delegation, though the rapid strengthening of the rand in the past year has made original targets more difficult. Two of the projects visited have been included as beneficiaries of the 2004 sponsored trek of the Wild Coast. The delegation also prompted some work towards re-establishing our Trade Union Committee, though that process has not yet been completed.

Other Links.

Our work on school links has struggled rather, with more expressions of intent than practical results, though we were pleased that an Elgin/Mdantsane school connection has been established quite independently of ACTSA. The Scottish Executive's education interchange scheme with Limpopo Province has finally come to fruition, and Brian Filling continues to assist very positive connections in further and higher education. We hope that a local authority connection we have tried to nurture for some time will shortly come about, which should help with education links there also.

We have failed to discover anything further about the Scottish Executive's contacts with Eastern Cape, but the current inquiry by the Scottish Parliament's European and External Relations Committee into Scotland's external relations policy should give an opportunity to promote the Eastern Cape link.

The Cross-Party Group on Southern Africa has still not been formally established, which has been frustrating. The situation wasn't helped when our primary contact for this, Brian Fitzpatrick, lost his seat at the election in May.

More positively, through the book appeal delivery to Amatole District Municipality we have made contact with the mayor, Sakkie Somyo, who is also Chair of the South African Local Government Association in Eastern Cape, and is keen to encourage links between his members and Scottish councils.

Local Connections.

We have continued to maintain and develop connections with other organisations in Scotland. The Scottish Churches Group on Southern Africa has been revived by Iain Whyte, who also helps keep us in touch with the Scotland-Zimbabwe Group. Our membership of NIDOS has meant increasing awareness of ACTSA among development organisations, and these connections overlap with contacts made through the Trade Justice Movement. We were glad to be involved in the visits of Thomas Mapfumo and Anders Nyberg to Glasgow Caledonian University's Centre for Political Song. Our usual series of stalls at events has kept our name in front of people, and the website generates regular enquiries we would not otherwise receive. We have made some attempt to update the website, though we have not yet got into the habits required to use it to anything like its full potential. We also get a steady trickle of other requests for help with contacts in Southern Africa or for information about the region.

None of the work described here would have been possible without the dedicated efforts of a fairly small number of people, and the general sympathy and practical support of a very much larger number. We are grateful to all of these.

John C. Nelson
