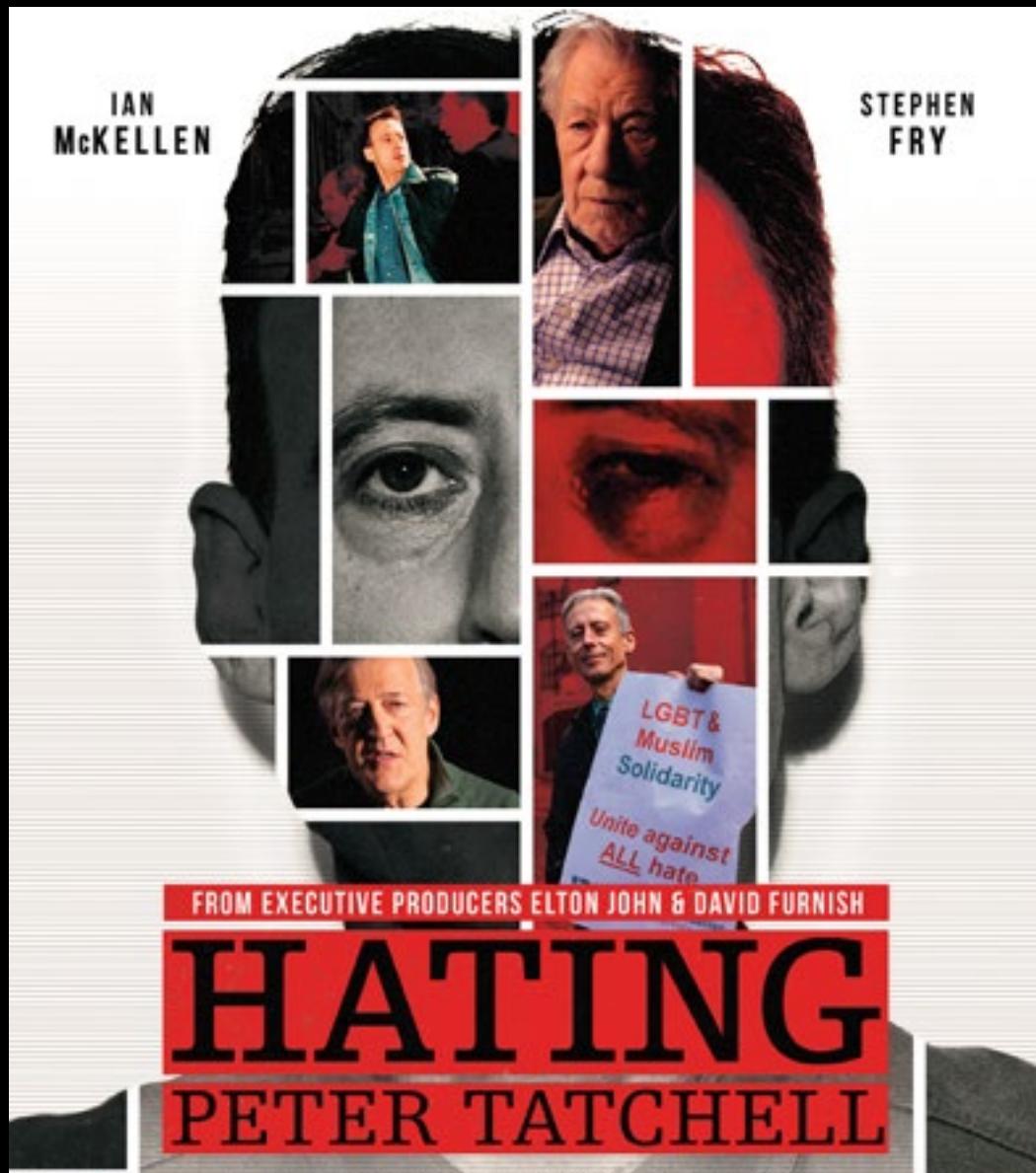


# LGBT+ Rights and the Fight Against Apartheid:

## An Interview With Peter Tatchell



Dr Andy Carolin—Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at UJ—interviews British human rights campaigner Peter Tatchell about his role in achieving a commitment to LGBT+ rights within the anti-apartheid movement.

**Andy:**

**My reason for initiating this discussion now is the Netflix documentary that was released in 2021 titled *Hating Peter Tatchell*. This documentary focuses on your human rights activism over five decades and maps a compelling history of the fight for LGBT+ rights in Britain. But our conversation today emerges in response to a glaring gap in the story that the documentary tells about you. In particular, the documentary is silent on your work in the anti-apartheid movement, and, more specifically, your work in refiguring the relationship between the anti-apartheid movement and LGBT+ rights. So, I think a good point of departure, then, given its omission from the documentary, is for me to ask you about your personal experiences of being part of the anti-apartheid movement in London in the 1970s and 1980s, and specifically being a gay activist in the movement. There have, for instance, been several accounts of homophobia.**

**Peter:**

I wouldn't say the British anti-apartheid movement was homophobic. But I certainly think there was a failure to address the intersection between race, sexuality and the broader LGBT+ movement. The only group that made the connection meaningfully was the so-called 'renegade' City of London Anti-Apartheid Group, which broke away from the mainstream movement because the City of London Group wanted to do direct action. The official anti-apartheid movement favoured occasional set-piece mass marches and lobbying. But that was often about the extent of it. The City of London Group was very much about picketing the South African embassy, which they did for nearly five years nonstop: all day and night, through hot weather and cold. It's one of the great direct action campaigns in post-1945 British history. The official anti-apartheid movement would hold a mass march every year from Hyde Park to Trafalgar Square, often getting tens of thousands of people. They also did periodic street stalls, petitions and protests against Barclays Bank. And they lobbied political parties, members of parliament and the government. But they didn't do direct action like the City of London Group. The City of London Anti-Apartheid Group was also the only faction within the wider anti-apartheid movement in Britain that saw sexuality as being part of the struggle for a free South Africa.

**So, you are suggesting that the City of London Group had a far more intersectional approach to human rights. How did the homophobia start coming into view for you across the different factions in the movement, which ultimately led to your monumental intervention in 1987?**

Well, the official anti-apartheid movement did not want to engage with the LGBT+ movement here in Britain or in South Africa. They saw it as a distraction from the main fight against apartheid. I argued that engaging with the LGBT+ movement both in Britain and South Africa would draw LGBT+ people into the anti-apartheid struggle and thereby strengthen it. On a number of occasions, I also raised the point that if the alleged homophobia – well it wasn't just alleged – of some people within the African National Congress (ANC) was not challenged, post-apartheid South Africa might easily end up with the same kind of homophobic persecution that we witnessed in Cuba after the revolution there.

**In South African public discourse today, the anti-apartheid movement and the ANC have almost become synonymous. But what you're describing is a far more complex set of solidarities.**

Well, there are two issues here. Within South Africa, in addition to the ANC, there was, of course, the Pan Africanist Congress, Azapo, and the Black Consciousness Movement which developed around Steve Biko. So, there were really four strands to the anti-apartheid movement inside South Africa. Or you

---

“ Well, the official anti-apartheid movement did not want to engage with the LGBT+ movement here in Britain or in South Africa. They saw it as a distraction from the main fight against apartheid. I argued that engaging with the LGBT+ movement both in Britain and South Africa would draw LGBT+ people into the anti-apartheid struggle and thereby strengthen it. ”

---

could perhaps say five strands if you included the church and people like Archbishop Desmond Tutu. As it happens, I knew Robert Sobukwe of the PAC. Although he never said so publicly, privately he was broadly supportive of LGBT+ rights. But I don't think he or the PAC ever took a public stance on it.

**For activists such as Robert Sobukwe, did you get the sense that they were starting to warm to an intersectional human rights movement because of a deeply held ethical conceptualisation of human rights, or was it a question of strategy?**

I wouldn't go as far to say that Robert Sobukwe or the PAC were warming to an intersectional anti-apartheid struggle. They were still a bit dismissive. They would say things like 'yes, of course, gay people shouldn't be persecuted', but there was no sense of urgency in integrating LGBT+ people into the anti-apartheid struggle. There were people in the ANC who said similar things: 'gay people shouldn't be criminalised', but that was not the official position of the ANC.

**You've written previously that it was 'deemed betrayal to question the ANC' and that 'criticism was unwelcome'. Can you elaborate on this?**

The way in which the City of London Anti-Apartheid Group was treated by the official movement was typical of a degree of sectarianism. Dissenting voices within the movement were not encouraged or welcomed. That is why the City of London Group, which was passionate about direct action against apartheid, had to effectively leave the mainstream movement and set up on their own. There wasn't a place within the official movement for them. For instance, when David Kitson was released from prison in 1984 after being imprisoned in South Africa for his anti-apartheid activities, he and his wife Norma came to live in London. They immediately engaged with the UK's official anti-apartheid movement. But the ANC was critical of David Kitson and the official movement kept him at arm's length out of deference to the ANC. David Kitson was in return critical of the official anti-apartheid movement in Britain. He therefore gravitated to the City of London Group. He and Norma were regular attendees at the 24/7 nonstop picket outside the South African embassy. I felt quite heartbroken that someone like David Kitson, who had

apartheid work, was so badly treated. Even if he had had some falling out with the ANC, the British anti-apartheid movement shouldn't have treated him the way it did. Not surprisingly, the City of London Group had a somewhat antagonistic relationship with the official movement.

**If we can move then to your historic engagement with the ANC in 1987, which eventually resulted in you securing the first-ever formal commitment from the ANC that gay and lesbian rights would be recognised in a then speculative post-apartheid state.**

I was doing an interview for the Labour Party's weekly newspaper, Labour Weekly, with Ruth Mompoti, a senior ANC official, to promote South Africa's Women's Day. As an anti-apartheid supporter, I wanted to help publicise Women's Day and the role that women had played in the struggle against apartheid. It was only at the end of the interview that I decided to ask the question about the ANC's stance on LGBT+ rights.

**Ruth Mompoti is quoted in your 1987 article as saying: 'I cannot even begin to understand why people want lesbian and gay rights. The gays have no problems. They have nice houses and plenty to eat. I don't see them suffering. No-one is persecuting them... We haven't heard about this problem until recently. It seems to be fashionable in the West.'**

I concluded from this interview that there was clear evidence that at least one very senior member of the ANC was homophobic. The interview confirmed the allegations and rumours of homophobia that I had previously heard. I knew that if the ANC was not challenged, it could end up like Cuba, pursuing extreme policies of homophobic persecution in a post-apartheid state. Even though many people in this period were pessimistic about the chances of change in South Africa, I always took the long view that the ANC would be victorious in the end. So, I knew that having them onside for LGBT+ rights was tremendously important. If I and others could help persuade the ANC before apartheid fell and before they came to government, then that would secure the place of LGBT+ people in a free and liberated South Africa. I knew that publicity would put pressure

on the ANC to respond. I wanted to get an official response – not just from Ruth Mompati – but from the ANC leadership in exile, then based in Lusaka. I realised that unless there was a lot of publicity about what Ruth Mompati had said, they would not be motivated to respond. And although I didn't want to embarrass the ANC, I felt it was necessary to provoke change. So that is why, in addition to publicising the interview in Labour Weekly, I then got it published in LGBT+ publications in Britain and other countries. And I also sent it to the anti-apartheid movement here in the UK and in several other countries as well. The idea was to publicise what had been said and to provoke an internal debate, and that is what happened. You know, there was an outcry in the LGBT+ community about what Ruth Mompati had said. There was also quite a lot of dissension within sections of the official anti-apartheid movement in the UK. They thought 'this looks bad'. They knew this was going to damage the ANC's credibility. Some grassroots members in the official movement agreed the ANC was wrong: that they should be supporting LGBT+ rights. So there were lots of different tensions and lots of different responses that came back. Some people seemed primarily concerned about protecting the ANC's reputation, while others were genuinely concerned to ensure that LGBT+ South Africans would have a place in a post-apartheid society. It was in September 1987 that I published the full interview in London's Capital Gay newspaper, under the heading 'ANC dashes hopes for gay rights in South Africa', which included quotes from Solly Smith, the ANC's representative in the UK. He expressed very similar negative opinions to those expressed by Ruth Mompati. His response was very much that LGBT+ matters were not an issue in South Africa. They were a diversion from the struggle against apartheid. The ANC was committed to majority rule, he said. Given that LGBT+ people were a minority, by implication their rights didn't matter. I had also asked Solly Smith if the ANC had a policy, or would have a policy, about repealing the anti-gay laws that existed under the apartheid regime. His reply was quite negative and dismissive.

**Your original article quotes Solly Smith as saying: 'We do not have a policy. Lesbian and gay rights do not arise in the ANC. We cannot be diverted from our struggle by these issues. We believe in the majority being equal. Those people are in the minority. The majority must rule.'**

The publication of the interviews with Mompati and Smith was a bombshell. No one had ever got the ANC leaders or representatives on record as being homophobic. But here I had it in black and white. It provoked an outcry, not just within LGBT+ circles but also among liberals and progressives, including some activists in the anti-apartheid movement itself. The next phase was to spread the word internationally. My thinking was to put the ANC under sufficient embarrassment and pressure that they would have to respond, and hopefully issue a policy in support of LGBT+ rights. That was merely a hope. I can remember that the publicity I generated did lead to both the ANC and the broader anti-apartheid movement being deluged with letters of protest and condemnation. A lot of people, even those that recognised that the fight against apartheid was the main fight, still were appalled that an ANC representative could speak in that kind of language about LGBT+ people.

#### **What was the immediate response to your publication and distribution of those interviews?**

By this stage, I was persona non grata in the official anti-apartheid movement because I'd already been supporting the City of London Group. The attitude of the official movement was that if you're in the City of London Group, you're not with us. You're not one of us. You're not part of us. It was very, very sectarian. I had discussed the interviews with some members of the City of London Group, including Norma and David Kitson, who suggested that I should write personally to Thabo Mbeki, who was then the ANC Director of Information in exile in Lusaka. I remember hearing that he was the most liberal and open minded of the ANC leaders, and that he was the best placed to get the ANC to rethink its policy on LGBT+ rights.

**It was Thabo Mbeki who then wrote to you directly to clarify that the ANC would support LGBT+ rights. In his letter, he is quoted as saying: 'The ANC is indeed very firmly committed to removing all forms of discrimination and oppression in a liberated South Africa. You are correct to point out that this commitment must surely extend to the protection of gay rights.' On a strategic level, it was an extraordinary success to not only get the ANC on record being homophobic but also to secure the ANC's public support for gay and lesbian rights. There was about a two-month delay in publishing**

**your article and then getting Thabo Mbeki's response. Can you describe this time?**

I've since been told by other senior sources that it provoked a really quite heated debate within the ANC in exile. I'm told that Oliver Tambo was quite supportive of a rethink of the official ANC policy and he was broadly in agreement with Thabo Mbeki's reply to me. When I wrote to Thabo Mbeki, I made the point that lesbian and gay activists were involved with the anti-apartheid movement and specifically cited Simon Nkoli and Ivan Toms. This apparently made an impact. At Thabo Mbeki's request, I communicated his reply to LGBT+ and anti-apartheid groups and media worldwide – the same people to whom I had sent the original damning interviews. I also sent it to members of South African LGBT+ groups, such as the Organisation of Lesbian and Gay Activists (OLGA), which was based in Cape Town. I also forwarded it to members of the United Democratic Front, the quasi-legal anti-apartheid coalition inside South Africa. So, very quickly, Mbeki's declaration of ANC support for LGBT+ rights spread out all over the world and, most importantly, inside South Africa itself. My letter was the trigger that shifted the ANC's stance. But of course, what I was doing complemented and reinforced the pro-gay efforts of activists within the United Democratic Front in South Africa. The person that comes to mind most significantly in that regard is Simon Nkoli.

**Simon Nkoli is an activist who appears to have divided both the anti-apartheid and LGBT+ rights movements. Do you want to speak about how he was perceived within the structures that you were working with in London?**

When Simon was arrested on treason charges, I was put in touch with him through an intermediary based in Scotland. I wrote to him via his mother while he was in prison and she passed them to him. Soon after his arrest, I organised a global letter writing campaign to support him. All the letters were directed to his mother's home. I've been told that the letters arrived by the sack-full from all over the world. Simon later told me that it was a great psychological and emotional boost to know that literally thousands of people from countries all over the world knew about his imprisonment and supported his courageous stance.

**There is a photograph of you protesting in London to raise awareness about Simon Nkoli, and the sign indicates this was done under the banner of the City of London Group.**

There was a huge groundswell of support with the LGBT+ community in the UK towards Simon Nkoli and his two-edged fight for LGBT+ rights and an end to apartheid. But much of the official anti-apartheid movement largely ignored Simon Nkoli. Many said that our focus should be on overthrowing apartheid, not highlighting individual cases or 'side' issues like LGBT+ equality.

**In as much as he was a divisive figure in parts of the anti-apartheid movement, there was also a strong feeling among parts of the white-dominated gay rights groups in South Africa, such as the Gay Association of South Africa, that the priority should be securing LGBT+ rights. Their ambivalence on apartheid can be construed as complicity with the apartheid system itself.**

That ambivalence on the anti-apartheid struggle is the sort of feedback that I was getting from some South African LGBTs at the time. A lot of gay white men in South Africa were asking 'why are you supporting this black communist who will destroy our society?'

**If we can move then to the final years of apartheid and the negotiations.**

While Thabo Mbeki's letter in response to me was a watershed moment in the ANC's formal commitment to LGBT+ rights, securing similar support within the United Democratic Front inside South Africa would not have been possible without the tireless activism of LGBT+ campaigners within the anti-apartheid movement, like OLGA in Cape Town, and individuals such as Simon Nkoli, Ivan Toms and others. It was in 1989, about two years after the published interview and Mbeki's letter, that I learned that the ANC was beginning work on drafting a constitution for a free and democratic South Africa. Albie Sachs was a leading ANC member and a key figure in the process. I asked him whether he planned to include an anti-discrimination clause in the draft constitution and whether this would include protection against discrimination based on sexuality. I remember that Albie was originally not very sympathetic and certainly

sceptical about whether it was possible. I explained that there were already anti-discrimination laws in several European countries that could provide a model for a clause in the post-apartheid constitution. I think Albie was a bit resistant because I wasn't South African and wasn't black. But to give him his credit, he did ask me to come back with examples of anti-discrimination clauses, and that's what I did. I gathered together copies of anti-discrimination laws that existed in Denmark, France and the Netherlands. Each of these countries had comprehensive anti-discrimination laws, which in many cases included an explicit ban on discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. I remember speaking to Albie after he'd seen the sample legal statutes and it was quite clear that his mind had changed. Not only did he seem to think it was a practical proposition, but he also thought it was a very good idea – not only that there should be an anti-discrimination clause in the post-apartheid constitution but that it should include sexual orientation and protections for other disadvantaged, discriminated communities. While I was heartened by the fact that Albie seemed to be warming to the idea, I had a nagging doubt that he might backtrack and I thought that he would probably be more convinced if the initiative came from inside South Africa itself. So, I sent copies of these anti-discrimination clauses to LGBT+ groups in South Africa: OLGA and GLOW (Gays and Lesbians of the Witwatersrand), which was formed by Simon Nkoli after his release from prison. I urged them to lobby Albie direct. Then I thought: nothing beats a face-to-face meeting. I discussed my plan with OLGA and suggested they

should send a representative to London to meet Albie Sachs in person to make the case for a broad-based comprehensive anti-discrimination clause which would, among other things, include protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation. At the end of 1989, I arranged a meeting between Albie Sachs and two representatives from OLGA, Derrick Fine and Niezhaam Sampson. I calculated that a face-to-face meeting would have a much bigger impact than any letters or phone calls. They then discussed what became OLGA's constitutional proposals, because by then OLGA had adopted the ideas that I had proposed and they had become OLGA's proposal and not mine. The meeting with Sachs went well. Once Albie was on our side, he was able to use his influence and leverage to win over other key people in the ANC leadership. The next thing that happened was that OLGA held meetings with Kader Asmal and Frene Ginwala. They were very influential in the ANC. Once the formal constitutional negotiations started, several LGBT+ groups worked together and used Thabo Mbeki's 1987 letter to me to win further support for LGBT+ rights within the many constituent organisations of the United Democratic Front.

**Your discussion of this history emphasises the importance of solidarity-building and relationships among activists. If I can ask you a broader question, then: I have argued elsewhere that LGBT+ rights in South Africa were engineered by a political elite, despite the fact that the majority of people in the country were quite homophobic. This is very different to the model we have seen in Britain, Ireland and the United States, where it was popular support that forced the political actors to change laws. If we contrast these two approaches – one in which grassroots movements put pressure upwards versus political elites imposing more progressive views on sceptical publics – what does this mean for LGBT+ mobilisation and activism going forward?**

“ While Thabo Mbeki's letter in response to me was a watershed moment in the ANC's formal commitment to LGBT+ rights, securing similar support within the United Democratic Front inside South Africa would not have been possible without the tireless activism of LGBT+ campaigners within the anti-apartheid movement, like OLGA in Cape Town, and individuals such as Simon Nkoli, Ivan Toms and others. ”

Obviously, a grassroots movement with public support is the best way to win LGBT+ human rights that are lasting and durable. But in situations where public awareness and support is very weak, then those in political power still have a responsibility to protect the human rights of the vulnerable and marginalised. It's not the ideal way to do it, but the priority must be to protect people from discrimination and hate

crimes. Human rights campaigns cannot be based on majority opinions but should be rooted in certain fundamental and inalienable principles, based on equality for all and discrimination for none. In the end, the ANC ensured the world's first constitutional protection for LGBT+ people. That was a trailblazing achievement. It was particularly courageous given that there was not much public support for it. Today, although the legal protection is there, the extent of daily anti-LGBT+ discrimination and hate crime is still high. It shows that changing the law is not enough. What is required is a cultural change, as much as a legal one.

**As an anti-apartheid activist based in the UK, what are your feelings about the current state of the post-apartheid project?**

Let me first say that I was overjoyed when apartheid fell. I had been involved in the movement against the racist regime for two decades, since I was a teenager, and I'd always believed that the system of racial segregation would eventually come to an end. I felt so happy for non-white South Africans that they would be treated as free and equal citizens. When the post-apartheid Constitution came into force, with its protection against discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, I was both elated and relieved. I felt relief that the fear the ANC might back out at the last minute, and ditch sexual orientation, did not come to pass. I applaud the ANC for sticking to its guns. But like many anti-apartheid activists in the UK and South Africa, I feel badly let down by the way that the ANC seems to have strayed so far from its founding ideals. The level of corruption is truly shocking. The huge contract for weapons at a time when millions of Black South Africans were malnourished or without water or electricity was deeply, deeply distressing. If I were in South Africa today, I would find it very difficult to vote for the ANC. I feel the party has betrayed the ideals for which so many of its members fought and, in many cases, lost their lives and liberty. It is heart-breaking. There is a lack of progress on land reform and a lack of any serious attempt to institute economic democracy and uplift the very poor. In too many respects, South Africa today is run by the ANC along elitist lines very similar to how the country was run in the dark days of apartheid. The gap between the rich and poor is unacceptable, especially given that so many people suffered in order to build an equal South Africa.

**Thank you so much for your time, Peter, and for sharing these perspectives and experiences.**

For more information about Peter Tatchell's human rights work: [www.PeterTatchellFoundation.org](http://www.PeterTatchellFoundation.org)

*Dr Andy Carolin is a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Education at the University of Johannesburg. He is the author of Post-Apartheid Same-Sex Sexualities: Restless Identities in Literary and Visual Culture (Routledge, 2021).*