Jim Watson’s account of the campaign that led to Nelson Mandela’s honorary degree from the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow

Mandela and Me...

The year was 1984 and I promise no references to a particular novel associated with this particular time! I was a fresh faced innocent and politically naive youth about to start an undergraduate degree in Mathematical Sciences at the University of Strathclyde. This was a huge step – to put it in context, this working class youth did not actually know what a university was whilst he was in fifth year at school. But having been kicked out of school after sixth year with a clutch of highers and an unconditional offer for Strathclyde I got excited by the invitation to attend a meeting on my first day in the Student Union at the start of “Freshers Fair” (again no clue as to what this was).

This meeting was held in level 8 and was really well attended. The student union officials all spoke with great eloquence and humour about what to expect in the coming years. We were allowed a bit of student democracy right at the beginning – the assembled masses had to decide what to call our newly refurbished bar on level 3. The first shout was for “Bacchus Bar” and this was explained as being after the Roman god of winemaking and merriment. Instant imposter syndrome sets in – there was actually someone here that knew the names of the Roman Gods! The next shout was a bit more sarcastic – “I think we should call it after the Roman God of war” was the shout. As we pondered this nomination they added “The Mars Bar”, cue much laughter and hilarity. Another shout was for the “Milky Bar” and in an outpouring of post-modern irony, this was what was approved. At least it sounded a bit more funny than the other one that was called the Mandela Bar...

It was Thatcher’s second term and there were many “causes” that had the student body protesting. This was about the time when they wanted to cut the minimum grant, restrict student access to benefits during the Christmas and Easter vacations and examine student loans. Each of these were vehemently opposed by the National Union of Students and Strathclyde Union. There were many times we took to the streets of Glasgow to protest our outrage and upset at these regressive policies. These demonstrations were a load of fun marching about Glasgow shouting, sitting down to block off streets in protest and then getting the hell out of the way when the police horses charged...ah the memories.

Meanwhile, back in the student political arena things were a bit more clearly defined between those on the right and those on the left. One issue that kept being raised via general meeting motions, arguments, debates and fists flying was that of Apartheid South Africa. The left were calling for sanctions, sports boycott, solidarity and other elements of protest, whilst those on the right, especially the Federation of Conservative Students, were parading about sporting their “Hang the Terrorist Mandela” t-shirts. These I found to be intensely hateful and lacking in basic humanity – although in retrospect that was perhaps the purpose of such items.

I had read up on Mandela ever since finding out a bar was named after him in the Union. It seemed a great injustice that he was suffering and it was only right and proper that we should campaign and do everything within our power to get this great man released. The naming of the bar before I got to Strathclyde certainly had an impact on me – it was the main reason that I started to critically examine my own views about Apartheid and the role of people involved in that struggle. It made the decision clear that those on the right were just fundamentally wrong and should be opposed.

At one of the general meetings during that first academic year, there was a motion that called upon the University to award an honorary degree to Nelson Mandela and to help set up a scholarship fund so that a student from one of the South African townships could be supported to study at our great place of useful learning. This was opposed by the usual characters on the right who decried it as gesture politics. The motion passed, along with an amendment from the floor that we should march directly to the Principal’s office and occupy it until we spoke and our demands were acknowledged. Off we set behind the union banner to the McCance building, straight up the stairs to the Principal’s office. His secretary was no match for us hardened veterans of struggle as we barged through the
door to confront Principal Hills with our demands. Of course, in hindsight we should have checked that the Principal would have been in his office. There is nothing worse than a smug secretary asserting that she was trying to inform us of this as we ran past. (There actually are many things that are worse but at the time it seemed this way!) After a quick discussion we decided to wait, overnight if necessary, to confront the Principal...

We did not have to wait long. Principal Hills was more than happy to talk with us. It was a bit surreal for a mere fresher to be in the office of the person running the University. Principal Hills, to his credit, gave us a fair hearing before explaining that there might be problems getting such a proposal through the University Court. He did not want it to appear that the University was being political in its actions. This was rapidly dispensed with – a spurious red herring as the action was clearly political and certainly the will of the student body.

His next objection was purely practical - according to the rules a person must be able to attend a degree convocation to pick up their award in person. This was impossible for Mr Mandela since he was currently rotting in a South African jail. There was a certain resigned acceptance of this from my fellow activists, after all rules are rules. This was my big moment – I spoke up and pointed out that the King of Norway was due to get an honorary degree but it was his son who was going to pick it up for him. “Ah but that is entirely different” said Principal Hills. “Why?” I simply replied. There was some stammering about international students from Norway, good relations etc., but he knew he was beat. I had read about this in the Herald that morning. Principal Hills said that he would put it to court and as they say, the rest is history as Nelson Mandela received his honorary Doctorate from the University.

The studentship was also set up and the annual Mandela auction became an unmissable part of the social fabric. At one of the auctions I picked up Tony Benn’s first ever Labour Party Badge and the red scarf worn by Alex Salmond as he was booted out of the House of Commons for interrupting the budget speech. Many other great figures from the political and entertainment worlds donated items for auction as well as local businesses. Some “celebrities” also turned up and took part in the auction – honourable mentions to Kirsty Wark and Elaine C Smith who I remember sitting at my table at one of the auctions. More important was the money raised to help fund a place for a student from the townships...

Looking back and reflecting on this and all else that has happened since; it is hard to overestimate the small elements that contribute to the whole in political activities. I am sure that Mr Mandela welcomed the support from the University of Strathclyde and that this helped to rally further support within South Africa itself, as well as in other places around the world. Strathclyde provided a lead for other organisations to engage in such progressive acts of solidarity. I am still proud of the small part that I played in that process....

Fast forward to the current day – the magic of Twitter allows you to follow the Mandela Foundation. This often takes the form of a quote from the great man himself. The screen saver on my phone has one such quote: -

“I never lose. I either win or I learn”

I also have a well-thumbed copy of A Long Walk to Freedom. I cannot recommend this book highly enough. It is a masterclass of humility, history and ultimately humanity. The sense of forgiveness within this great person just seeps through the pages. If I had my way, it would be a set text on every literature course going, as well as politics, sociology etc.

I look forward to the erection of a commemorative statue in Glasgow. This will be a fitting tribute to the man who captured the hearts and minds of activists, a man whose greatness was overshadowed by his humility and who is held with the highest regard in and around the wonderful city of Glasgow.

Jim Watson  August, 2020