

Mr Chancellor,

What is freedom? Is it a right to do, say or think whatever we want? Universities are open institutions where academic freedom and freedom of speech are fundamental to our mission. We should not take this for granted, it is intellectual freedom that allows us to achieve excellence in all that we do. Today we are here to recognise one man's selfless struggle for his people's freedom. We are here to celebrate the achievements of Mr Archie Sibeko, also known as Zola Zembe, a freedom fighter, trade unionist and politician, who played a significant role in the weakening of the apartheid regime in South Africa.

The turning point in Archie's life was when he attended – and not by choice - a different sort of institution from the one in which we are gathered, nonetheless, a learning establishment comprised of a collection of bright minds. Despite being trapped within the walls of a prison their united resolve led to the eventual dismantling of apartheid. This was in 1956, when Archie was arrested and taken to Johannesburg with 155 others and put on trial for 'High Treason'. His fellow classmates included Nelson Mandela and Oliver Tambo. What the authorities had failed to understand at the time, was that by incarcerating these intellectuals, lawyers, trade unionists together, the leadership were able to meet more easily than outside where distance, lack of funds, and police harassment made it difficult. The state had created an anti-apartheid academy whose graduates succeeded in making one of the most significant impacts in the history of South Africa, the demise of the apartheid regime.

Of that time in jail, Archie tells a lovely story. Local women near the prison insisted that their leaders should not have to eat prison food, and brought food to the prisoners every day. Since most of them were Indian women, the food

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was hot and spicy. That is how Archie acquired his taste for Indian food, and that is why you will find him and his wife Joyce at an Indian restaurant in Tynemouth at least once a week. This is also where our former Vice-Chancellor, Professor Chris Brink joined them on occasion. Chris said he felt privileged to have Archie and Joyce as friends holding Archie in high regard and with a degree of reverence – and his contemporaries, for what they contributed to freedom and human dignity. He said Martin Luther King would have been proud of Archie.

Archie was born on 3 March 1928 in a small traditional Xhosa village, Kwezana in the Eastern Cape, South Africa. His father died when he was young and he was brought up with three siblings by his widowed mother. She believed in education and sent Archie to join his brother in the village school at age 7. To complete his Junior Certificate he went to work for a year in Cape Town to raise the fees then afterwards studied at Lovedale High School for three years before obtaining a diploma in Agriculture from Fort Cox College. Archie had initially planned to combine being a Government Agricultural Officer with helping his mother plough their fields and tend their animals. This was until he discovered at college that the main duties of a government officer was to enforce culling of animal stock belonging to black subsistence farmers, because of ‘overgrazing’. He was not prepared to do that when farms belonging to white people across the river had vast herds on their rich land. Instead after graduation he went to Cape Town to find alternative employment, so he could provide an income for his young family.

During this time, Zola, as Archie was known, crossed paths with political activists and trade unionists who rejected discrimination. They mentored and guided him into his first steps as a trade union activist. He then joined the African National Congress (ANC) becoming a full time union organiser leading

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to his arrest in 1956. After his year in prison and the dismissal of most of the charges, he returned home with his resolve strengthened. Subsequently the ANC was banned and a '90 day detention without trial' was introduced, driving the anti-apartheid movement underground.

The ANC reversed their policy of non-violence and created a liberation army called *Mkonto we Siswe* (MK). Archie was one of the men sent illegally to Tanzania for military training, leaving his wife and five children. He became a Commander at MK's first camp. Archie never saw his first wife again who died a few years later. A shift in policy towards seeking world support for the struggle against apartheid led to Archie being redeployed to London. Here he became head of the West European office of SACTU (the South African Congress of Trade Unions) and travelled widely raising thousands of pounds for the underground trade unions.

In 1990, Archie returned home for the first time in 27 years and flung himself into ANC politics in Cape Town. The turbulence that followed in his work with the South African Railways Workers Union made Archie ill. After being diagnosed with high blood pressure and suffering a minor stroke he was sent by his comrades back to his second wife, Joyce who was working in Manchester. The advice was simple, carry on in the thick of it, but probably not for long, or retire after all your adult life in the struggle and hope to live rather longer. Although he retired Archie continues to raise money to improve education resources in his home region in South Africa. He has also written four books documenting his life and aspects of the struggle against apartheid in the hope that lessons learned in discrimination can be used by the next generation to make our world a better place to live.

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When he is not raising money for charity or writing books he can be found playing croquet. He has never been one for formality and when Archie and Joyce arrived in Tynemouth they joined the local croquet club where the members all appeared rather restrained - with 'hard luck' and 'good shot'. He regards playing a game as going back to childhood and whoops and jumps and shouts 'got you' - and so do a lot of the other players now. He often causes a few eyebrows to raise with his preference for hugging over formality. The hug features in another of Joyce's memories. He was awarded a high honour, the Order of Luthuli in Silver, perhaps equivalent to a knighthood, by the South African Government at State House in Pretoria in 2006. When the then President, Thabo Mbeki, had bestowed it upon him he said 'thanks Thabo' and gave him a big bear hug.

In asking Archie's wife what characteristics have enabled him to be a strong leader, she replied, his strength of commitment, persuasiveness and warmth which always shines through. As to what Archie thinks about our award then he sees this as an honour not just for himself but for all those who devoted so much of their lives to the overthrow of apartheid and the establishment of a democratic South Africa. Both Archie and his wife hope that they have managed to improve the lives of the future generations and that we, Newcastle University, will contribute by educating people about the struggle for freedom and democracy.

Mr Chancellor, for his courage, determination and inspiration to achieve freedom in our lifetime, I present to you, Archie Sibeko, for the award of Doctor of Civil Law, *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Selina Stead, Public Orator

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