

# A celebration of the life of George Johannes

25 November 1945 – 30 November 2022



**Tuesday, 12 September 2023**  
**South African High Commission**  
**Trafalgar Square, London WC2**

# Programme

South African Choir

South Africa High Commissioner His Excellency  
Jeremiah Nyamane (Kingsley) Mamabolo

Brian Filling, Honorary Consul for South Africa and  
Chair, ACTSA Scotland

Lord Peter Hain MP, Vice President of ACTSA

Message from family

Selection of condolence messages

South African National Anthem

# Ambassador George Johannes – an Appreciation

by Brian Filling  
Honorary Consul for South Africa

Comrade George Johannes and I worked together on many campaigns and projects over some 40 years and became very close friends.

This meant that we met on numerous occasions and in diverse locations including Glasgow, Edinburgh, London, Pretoria, Johannesburg, Cape Town, Bern, and many other places in between.

George travelled all over the UK speaking at meetings, conferences, pickets and demonstrations in support of the boycott, sanctions against apartheid South Africa and solidarity with the African National Congress (ANC). He was a very effective speaker and campaigner and well understood the politics of Britain. He made a great impression on audiences with his knowledge and understanding of what was required in the struggle against apartheid. George inspired thousands of people to take action.

On a visit to Scotland following the end of apartheid George flew in from Berlin, where he was Deputy Ambassador, to take part in a *Witness seminar on Apartheid*, hosted by Glasgow Caledonian University. He participated alongside Denis Goldberg (who had been jailed in the same trial as Nelson Mandela), myself and others from the anti-apartheid movement.

In his contribution, George said,

*“...when I worked at the ANC office in Penton Street, we had lots of respect for the anti-apartheid activists... If it wasn't for solidarity I don't think that we would be finished with that struggle yet, and I think that is very, very important... that it in a sense cushioned us because we were asking ourselves what could we do without the Anti-Apartheid Movement... Many people didn't realise that you softened the pain, and you were part of the passion of the sufferings of the people of South Africa.”*



1977 Soweto anniversary demonstration

*“I certainly believe that the concept of democracy that you’ve had went beyond the whole concept of just voting every five years, but looking at much deeper and broader issues of what democracy should actually encapsulate.”*

*“When we saw how the institutions of state also behaved towards their own citizens we were not surprised that people in Downing Street could have such policies of support for apartheid. Especially the time when Mrs Thatcher was in power.”*

When Cheryl Carolus was departing the UK as High Commissioner, George, as Deputy High Commissioner, asked me to deliver the farewell speech on behalf of all those present. He had arranged African drums behind the partition out of sight in the Kinema (the main hall in South Africa House) to be revealed after the welcome drinks. There was a drum for everyone to play during the proceedings. George certainly knew how to create the perfect atmosphere.

George used his connections, built up over many years of sustained activity, to garner support for the new South Africa, from many individuals and organisations

including Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA), the successor organisation to the Anti-Apartheid Movement, the Labour Party and the trade unions.

When Ken Cameron, General Secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, passed away, the union asked me if I could try and get a message from Nelson Mandela as Ken and the union had been staunch supporters of the struggle. I drafted the message and George facilitated Nelson Mandela's support. The message from Madiba was read at Ken's funeral.

While George was stationed in London, classical music would always be playing softly in the background in his office on the upper floor of South Africa House on Trafalgar Square. This contrasted with his impromptu tours for visitors to the High Commission including showing them the room where the apartheid operatives had prepared the bomb which blew up the ANC's London Headquarters at 28 Penton Street, Islington, in 1982.

During one of High Commissioner Cheryl Carolus' visits to Scotland, accompanied by George, she presented his archive to Glasgow Caledonian University. The archive is held as the *George Johannes Collection* in the university's Archive Centre along with the Scottish Anti-Apartheid Movement's archives.

Recently I took the current High Commissioner, Jeremiah Nyamane (Kingsley) Mamabola, to the university where he was impressed by material from the Collection and recalled his work with George for the overthrow of apartheid, the solidarity of the Front-Line states, and the development of the new South Africa.

It is a fascinating collection and is being increasingly used by students and academic researchers. George's dedication and his life of commitment to the struggle for the liberation of South Africa is preserved in the Collection.

Ambassador George Johannes will be sorely missed by his family and his many friends and comrades around the world.

# George Johannes obituary

by Brian Filling

*The Guardian*

Monday 2 January 2023

My friend and comrade George Johannes, who has died aged 77, was an African National Congress cadre who served for a time in its military wing, Umkhonto we Sizwe. He was also a member of the South African Communist party and, following the end of apartheid, a diplomat.

George was born in Cape Town, the second youngest of eight children. His mother, Maria (nee Leisering), worked as a cook for local priests and played an important role in the community of Cape Flats, helping to deliver babies, taking in children and laying out the dead. His father, David, was often away from home as a railway worker and travelling musician.

George attended St Augustine's Roman Catholic primary school and then enrolled himself at Trafalgar high school, which was known for its politically active teachers and students.

In 1969 he left for Ireland, where his parents hoped he would train for the priesthood. In fact, he studied philosophy and history at the University of Cork, graduating in 1973 before returning to Africa, where he formally joined the ANC in 1976 and, around the same time, underwent military training with Umkhonto we Sizwe, for whom he worked on intelligence and security under the assumed name of Joe Louw.

Later he served the ANC across southern Africa in various roles, including as a journalist for Radio Freedom in Angola and then as secretary for the ANC's Department of Information and Publicity in Zambia, before being posted to London in the early 1980s.

In the UK, among other things, George travelled across the country for the ANC, speaking at political events. Following the end of apartheid in 1994 he went back to South Africa to join Nelson Mandela's Department of Labour as director of

international relations, before returning to London four years later to be deputy high commissioner at the South African high commission.

He again returned to South Africa in 2005, this time to work at the Department of Foreign Affairs as the director responsible for the UK, Ireland and the Benelux countries. In 2007 he became deputy ambassador to Germany, and two years later was appointed ambassador to Switzerland, Liechtenstein and the Vatican. Later a separate South African mission was created to the Vatican, and George became its first ambassador in Rome.

His archive, the *George Johannes Collection*, is held at Glasgow Caledonian University.

George is survived by his third wife, Banu (nee Altikulacoglu), their son, Liam, another son, Joseph, from an earlier relationship with Deborah Gibberd, two children, Charlotte and Daniel, from his second marriage to Jan Clements, which ended in divorce in 2007, two grandchildren and his siblings Arthur and Veronica.

## **Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika**

**Nkosi sikelel' iAfrika  
Maluphakanyisw' uphondo lwayo  
Yizwa imithandazo yethu,  
Nkosi sikelela,  
Tina lusapho lwayo**

**Morena boloka setshaba sa heso  
O fedise dintwa le matshwenyeho,  
O se boloke, O se boloke  
Setshaba sa heso  
Setshaba sa Afrika**



Programme sponsored by UNISON • Event sponsored by ACTSA Scotland

A special thank you to George's family for helping to fund this celebration of his life