

# In celebration of *Helen Suzman's life*

(07/11/1917 - 01/01/2009)

*'I stand for simple justice, equal opportunity and human rights. These are indispensable elements in a democratic society and worth fighting for.'*



Helen gets a warm hug from a free Nelson Mandela in Soweto in February 1990.



Helen on one of her regular visits to squatter communities in the Western Cape with other Progressive Party members.



As the screws tightened around any dissent against the Nationalist regime, liberal opponents were considered subversive extremists. Helen's attacks on the government evoked much abuse, but she never cowed. Her meticulously researched facts and devastating repartee triumphed over her opponent's invective.

# Suzman - fearlessly manning the liberal bridgehead

*As the lone Progressive Party MP left after the 1961 general election, Suzman used her seat as a platform to advance the fight for liberalism, including extending the vote to South Africa's black citizens.*

PATRICK LAURENCE

HELEN SUZMAN, who was the elder statesman of South African liberalism, who died on January 1 this year, invoked thoughts about the importance of establishing bridgeheads and successfully defending them in political contestation as well as in military warfare.

To appreciate the point it is necessary to recall two dates in South Africa's political history, both of which are relevant to Suzman's long and illustrious political career. The dates are November 1959 and October 1961.

They mark, respectively:

- The formation of the Progressive Party (PP) by 11 dissenting members of the United Party (UP), one of whom was Suzman, who had come to the conclusion that it was futile to campaign for liberal reform in South Africa from within the UP. They founded the Progressive Party to strive for that purpose more vigorously.
- The holding of the first general election after the emergence of the PP, in which all but one of its members of parliament lost their seats. The exception was Suzman. She retained her seat in Houghton, Johannesburg, as a bridgehead from which to advance the fight for liberalism, including, at that stage, the extension of the vote to black citizens who fulfilled education and financial requirements.

It is, of course, a matter of historical record that Suzman successfully defended the bridgehead for 13 years against recurring attempts by the UP to unseat her. During the 13 years between 1961 and 1974 she was the sole PP representative in parliament.

It is pertinent to recall that during those years, Suzman fearlessly opposed the National Party's policy of apartheid, in its petty and grand manifestations, as well as the UP's fine sounding but contradictory policy of "white leadership with justice".

With the advantage of hindsight, it is clear that Suzman's indefatigable advancement of liberal policies contributed greatly to the PP breakthrough in 1974, when six PP candidates were elected to parliament.

Without Suzman, the PP might have had to wait another 13 years before achieving a breakthrough comparable to that attained in 1974.

To extend the same point further into the future, it is not idle to speculate that had Suzman not defended her Houghton bridgehead as successfully as she did, the South African electorate might not have been ready to accept President F W de Klerk's decision to negotiate a peaceful settlement in 1990 with the outlawed black nationalist movements and their communist allies.

It is a commonplace observation that De Klerk adopted many of the liberal policies that Suzman propagated 30 years earlier and that but for her - and her colleagues in the PP and its successors parties, the Progressive Reform and Progressive Federal Parties - the white electorate might not have voted for De Klerk's settlement initiative in the 1992 referendum.

Had the white voters not given De Klerk the required mandate, the South African equivalent of Armageddon might have occurred: racially-based civil war.

Thirty years after she established the bridgehead for the PP, Suzman witnessed the birth pangs of another breakaway party, the Congress of the People (Cope) under the leadership of African National Congress dissidents Mosiuoa Lekota and Mbhazima Shilowa, with respected cleric Dr Mvume Dandala as the party's presidential candidate.

Though Cope has yet to define itself more fully ideologically-speaking, it has declared itself strongly as a defender of the rule of law, a core liberal value, and the underpinning principle that all citizens are equal before the law and that, equally important, no one - not even Jacob Zuma, whom the ANC wants to take over as South Africa's president this year - is above the law.

During an interview with the *Jewish Report*, a month or two before her death, Suzman welcomed the formal emergence of Cope in Bloemfontein on December 16.

She thought the emergence of a party with the potential to reduce the colossal size and power of the ANC is salutary for the growth and maturation of South Africa's still young democracy.

She approved, too, Cope's commitment to reforming the present closed list system of proportional representation, arguing that it cedes too much power to the party bosses while failing to ensure that elected representatives are accountable to the electorate.

She knew and liked Lekota as a person but reserved judgement on him as a political leader in the present context until the policies that he espouses as the chairman of Cope, are defined more precisely.

The conversation with Suzman turned to another issue: the most memorable occasion during her long 36 years in parliament.

She identified it as the abolition of the pass laws in 1986 by the government of P W Botha, an objective for which she fought long and hard and one which she shared with a succession of black leaders, including Albert Luthuli, Robert Sobukwe and, of course, Nelson Mandela.

It is typical of Suzman that she gave Botha credit for finally recognising that the laws were unenforceable instead of emphasising that he was compelled to do so by underlying demographic and political forces beyond his control.

Only the historically blind and deaf will deny her own campaign against the "dompass" was a central link in the causal chain that led to the abrogation of the pass laws, as Albert Nothnagel, a senior member of the National Party acknowledged on the day that the pass laws were abolished: he crossed the floor to publicly congratulate her on the success of her crusade against the hated laws.

Suzman's generous recognition of Botha's belated decision to scrap the pass laws is particularly

commendable in view of Botha's reaction to the assassination by Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd in parliament in 1966 by Demitrios Tsafendas, a deranged parliamentary messenger who thought Verwoerd, was doing too much for black South Africans and not enough for their white compatriots.

Suzman recalled that Botha rushed down the aisle, stopped at her desk and, waving his finger at her, exclaimed: "Julle het dit gedoen. Nou gaan ons julle almal vang." ("You [people] have done it. Now we're going to catch all of you!")

She recalled, too, that the parliamentary speaker, Henning Klopper, a founder of the Afrikaner Broederbond, extracted a grudging apology from Botha the next day.

She rarely missed an opportunity to praise Klopper for his scrupulously fair treatment of her while fulfilling his duties as Speaker, the more so as some of Klopper's colleagues in the National Party saw Suzman as a dangerous fifth columnist in league with the "barbarians at the gate" and their communist mentors.

In her fight for justice in South Africa, Suzman had to endure attacks from black nationalists and communists of all hues as well as white supremacists.

A manifestation of the attitude towards her in some quarters of the ANC is contained in the



**Top: Helen visiting a school with Winnie Mandela to see for herself the presence of armed soldiers patrolling school grounds. During the turbulent 1980s, township schools were in turmoil.**

**Above: Greeting voters on election day, 1966.**

**Left: Standing alone in Parliament 1961 - 1974. For 13 years, Helen Suzman was the Progressive Party's sole representative in Parliament. In the face of unremitting hostility, she never lost her courage or compromised her principles in her fight against apartheid's racist agenda and the erosion of civil liberties and the rule of law.**

January 1, 1971 New Year message of Oliver Tambo, leader of the ANC External Mission, in which he identifies Suzman as an "agent of colonialism" working in conjunction with Prime Minister B J Vorster and Broeder Klopper.

In that message Tambo refers to Suzman as the "sweet bird from the blood-stained south who flew into Zambia (where the ANC had its headquarters to sing a singularly sweet song". The reference to "a singularly sweet song" is an exercise in oratorical sarcasm as Tambo goes on in his message to accuse Suzman of hypocrisy by pretending to be in favour of change while striving to prevent it.

Tambo's deduction in his 1971 New Year message is based on Suzman's declared opposition to the international campaign to isolate South Africa and her doubts about the efficacy and morality of armed struggle as a means of affecting change.

Tambo's conclusion that Suzman was thus opposed to change per se, is fallacious, as her campaign for the abolition of the pass law and the iniquitous policy of spending far less on the education of black children than white children, shows.

Former President Thabo Mbeki was later to use Tambo's message in one of his "Letters from the President" in *ANC Today* to castigate Suzman - though she was no longer a political activist in the party political arena - and liberals in general.

Suzman's fight for the extension of the franchise to black citizens - which from the mid-1970s meant universal adult suffrage rather than a qualified vote - serves as a further refutation of Tambo's deduction that she was opposed to change because she did not agree with the methods adopted by the ANC.

Since her retirement from parliament in 1989, Suzman had to endure further attempts to type-cast her as an effete or even hypocritical liberal. Ronald Suresh Roberts, the authorised biographer of Mbeki, even refers to her as "an illiberal". His reasoning is akin to that of Big Brother in George Orwell's *1984*, who declares: "War is peace. Freedom is slavery. Ignorance is strength."

Suzman, who won the 2002 Liberal International prize for her struggle for freedom in South Africa, can rest assured that her contribution to the emancipation of South Africans from racism will have its place in history.

Referring to her National Party opponents in Parliament, no less a person than Nelson Mandela has said of Suzman: "Knowing what a thorn in the flesh of even your friends and allies you can be, your forthright fearlessness must have made life hell for them when confronted by you."

As Christopher Saunders and Nicholas Southey note in *A Dictionary of South African History*, Suzman was "a doughty fighter for human rights".

May her memory enrich us all.



**Top: Attending the service and addressing the mourners at the funeral of assassinated activists, Dr and Mrs Fabian Ribiero, in Mamelodi, Pretoria, 1986.**

**Middle: Outside the polling booth on election day with Selma Browde and Max Borkum (campaign manager).**

**Above left: Inspecting Limehill resettlement site with Father Cosmos Desmond, 1969.**

## HELEN SUZMAN - LOOKING BACK

**1917:** Helen Suzman (née Gavronsky) was born on November 7 in Germiston, Gauteng. Her mother, Frieda, died two weeks later and her father, Samuel, remarried some years later.



**1937:** At the young age of 19 she married Dr Mosie Suzman. They had two daughters.

**1941:** After the birth of her first child she returned to the University of the Witwatersrand to finish her degree and until 1944 she worked as a statistician at the War Supplies Council.



**1953:** Suzman became MP for the opposition United Party in the Houghton constituency.

**1954:** Helen, an MP for 2 years, meets Colin Eglin who was about to become a member of the Cape Provincial Council. This friendship spanned a lifetime.

**1965:** She visits a dying Bram Fischer in Pretoria Prison and successfully appealed to have him removed to the care of his doctor brother.

**1974:** For 13 years she is the PP's sole representative in parliament, until 7 colleagues joined her.

**1986:** The pass laws were repealed. Suzman had been agitating for their repeal throughout her political career.

**1994:** South Africa's 1st democratic election. Suzman through her long liberal career did much of the spadework to make this transition possible.

**1996:** She visited former President Nelson Mandela on a number of occasions in jail and in 1996 was at his side when he signed the new Constitution.

**1997:** Nelson Mandela bestows upon Suzman the Order of Meritorious Service (Gold). He commended her courage.

**2001:** She is criticised for her remarks after 5 SA cricketers are caught smoking dagga in a West Indies hotel, that it is not an offence.

**2006:** She described former President PW Botha, shortly after the latter's death, as an ill-tempered, angry debater and a bully.



**1933:** She matriculates at Parktown Convent in Johannesburg where a rose garden is established 70 years later to celebrate her lifelong struggle for justice and human rights in South Africa.



**1945:** She became a lecturer in economics at Wits, a position she filled until her election as Member of Parliament.

**1959:** After deep divisions within the UP between conservative and progressive factions, 11 MPs resigned, including Suzman. The Progressive Party is founded with Dr Jan Steytler as its first leader.

**1961:** She became the sole representative of the liberal PP, which later would evolve into the present-day DA. In parliament.

**1967:** Suzman visits Mandela on Robben Island for the first time.

**1977:** The PP's successor, the Progressive Federal Party, became the official opposition.

**1978:** She receives the United Nations' award for human rights. She was also twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

**1989:** Suzman retires from politics and Tony Leon succeeds her as MP for Houghton. When Suzman retired from politics, the Nats had begun to adopt the liberal policies she had stood for.

**2000:** She sticks out her neck on national television by declaring that Mr Mwakhe Mbuli, the People's Poet, who was serving a 13-year jail term for armed robbery, is innocent.

**2008:** The first annual Helen Suzman lecture is presented at the University of Cape Town, with Mr Kader Asmal, former Minister of Education and Mr Colin Eglin, her former colleague in the PFP, as speakers.

**2009:** Dies on New Year's day at the age of 91.

# Speakers rejoice in Helen's life

*Helen used her privileges as a member of parliament to gain access to areas forbidden the general public - prisons, townships, resettlement areas - and people banished, banned, forgotten, untouchable.*



Helen's daughter Patricia is embraced by Mamphela Ramphele.



Graca Machel greets Helen's daughter Frances.

STAFF REPORTER  
PHOTOGRAPHS:  
ILAN OSSENDRYVER

HELEN SUZMAN was one of the greatest daughters of our South African soil. So said Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu at a memorial service held at the University of the Witwatersrand last weekend.

The Great Hall was packed to capacity with high-level guests including former President Thabo Mbeki, his wife Zanele, Graca Machel, wife of Nelson Mandela, Constitutional Court judge, Albie Sachs, head of the Suzman Foundation, Raenette Taljaard, and former leader of the Democratic Alliance, Tony Leon.

Suzman's two daughters and her six-month old great-grandchild were also present.

Tutu described Suzman as "a feisty lady" who was tickled pink when he greeted her as 'my child'. She thought it incongruous that someone almost two decades older than him could be described as such.

He said he could not believe that such a diminutive person could stand up to the "uncouth Nats for so many years.

"She was 'stoksielalleen' (all on her own) with scorn poured on her, and called a misguided do-gooder who needed to redeem herself. It must have been daunt-

ing and intimidating. "She deserves all the accolades for her remarkable determination and courage. She opposed and exposed the viciousness of apartheid in a fearless way," said Tutu.

He warned that those who became arrogant, who became drunk with power, who were seemingly unassailable, should "watch out".

"The Nats were returned election after election with increased majorities. Waar is hulle nou? (Where are they now?) Those who hold on to power and are affected by arrogance, must know they are ultimately going to get their comeuppance, for, ultimately, power is service," he said.

Tutu said Suzman's legacy was of a true public service.

"Maybe we haven't shown how deeply grateful we are and how much we owe her.

"Many described her as a masochist, saying there had to be easier ways of making a living," he said.

Tutu added that South Africa had a "remarkable group of human beings" who should be able to provide principled leadership, like Suzman did.

"We want those holding public office to be principled persons; persons we can be proud to look up to, not embarrassments that need to be defended."

The Inkatha Freedom Party leader, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, said in his trib-

ute Suzman chose to "live out her values instead of choosing a life of white privilege".

He described his warm relationship with Suzman, saying they had worked together over the years.

"Helen would phone me to come from KwaZulu-Natal to help quell the violence in the hostel areas," he said. She often invited him to dine at her house, something which was not acceptable in those apartheid days, he said.

The last time he saw her, he said, was in October last year. "Her beautiful blue eyes shone as brightly as ever and her wicked sense of humour was still there. She was never given the recognition she deserved," he emphasised.

Nicky Oppenheimer, in his tribute, said Suzman was never a politician. "Her courage was infused by moral clarity."

The Nats often called Helen a "cricket" in a derogatory manner. "They didn't realise that they hit the nail on the head. Jimmy Cricket was Pinocchio's voice of conscience. Suzman was the voice of our conscience," he said, adding that there were many similarities between some of our politicians and Pinocchio.

Chancellor of Wits University, Justice Dikgang Moseneke, said Suzman was the only woman, besides his mother, whom he saw during his 10 years on Robben Island.

"Helen fought for us, visited us and ex-



Irene Menell and Thabo Mbeki.



DA leader Helen Zille.

posed our jail conditions to the world. It was she who fought for prisoners' rights to study and it is as a result of her efforts that I am in the position I am today," he said, adding that he had been proud to have her sitting in the front seat of the Great Hall on the day of his inauguration.

Ann Bernstein, head of the Centre for Development and Enterprise, told many anecdotes about Suzman.

"After the 1961 general election, Helen was the only member of her new party re-elected to parliament. Then-Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd gloated triumphantly, saying to her: "I have written you off." She replied: "The whole world has written you off."

For the next 13 years the Progressive Party in Parliament consisted of one person - Helen Suzman. Through this "trial of fire" she became South Africa's greatest parliamentarian and human rights activist, said Bernstein.

She was the lone voice in parliament voting against the policies of apartheid.

Helen used her privileges as a member of parliament to gain access to areas forbidden the general public - prisons, townships, resettlement areas - and people, banished, banned, forgotten, untouchable.

She reported her findings and presented alternative policies to the country through the parliamentary press gallery.

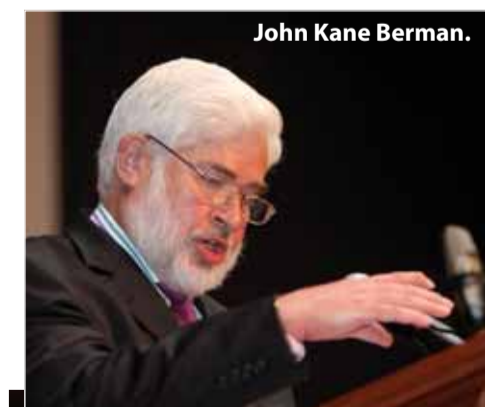
Without her, much in that terrible period would have been passed unquestioned, unnoticed, said Bernstein.

"It was Helen's probing questions in parliament - thousands of them - that provided information apartheid's critics could use to rally opposition," she said.

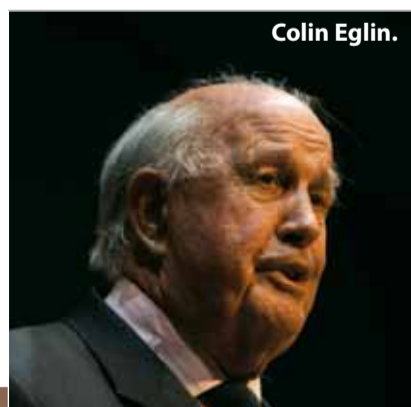
Bernstein relates how one of Helen's nephews was in the army at the time. The commandant wanted to know if anyone had a member of parliament as a relative. When he discovered that Helen Suzman was someone's relation he immediately said: "Oh G-d, tell her nothing!"

"If only our current MPs engendered such fear of exposure in today's officials," she mused.

Helen was inundated with requests for assistance from desperate people. People asked if she would intervene with the minister for a family who had been "endorsed out" of urban areas.



John Kane Berman.



Colin Eglin.



Suzman's grandson Daniel Jowell.



Tony Leon.



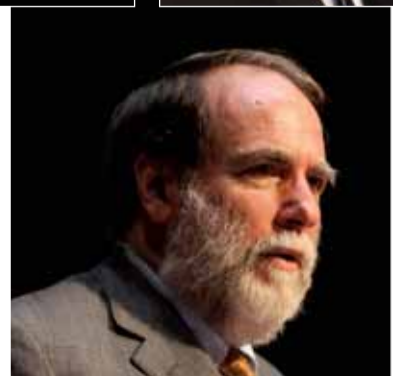
Mbeki and Frances Suzman Jowell.



Dikgang Moseneke.



Ann Bernstein.



Nicky Oppenheimer.



Mangosuthu Buthelezi.



Mamphele Ramphele.



Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

"Would she find the son grabbed by the police and never seen again? Would she help a detainee on a hunger strike? No plea went unanswered, despite the fact that few, if any of these requests, would result in votes or assistance towards re-election."

Bernstein said she inspired generations of South Africans who felt empowered by her voice at a time when opposition was being trampled on.

"You will find many of those people in leadership positions in South Africa today. There are those who think she mainly influenced white people. They are wrong," she said.

Bernstein said Suzman had an immense impact on race relations, and over time, a profound influence on white leaders which played its part in enabling our transition to democracy.

"Helen's reputation was built through grinding hard work - not grand philosophies or inflammatory speeches.

"The House of Assembly would shout at her, baying, when she stood up to speak and oppose. The three prime ministers she confronted over a period of 25 years, Verwoerd, John Vorster and PW Botha, were, in her words, "as nasty a trio as you could encounter in your worst nightmares".

Through her mischievous wit, Helen fearlessly cut through all their assumptions.

"I do not know," she once purred in parliament, "why we equate - and with the examples before us - a white skin with civilisation."

She recommended that members of PW Botha's Cabinet should go and see for themselves the conditions in which black people were forced to live, but only provided they went "heavily disguised as



Frances Suzman Jowell.

human beings".

"Free Mandela, get rid of apartheid, free Mandela, get rid of apartheid.' She was like a chihuahua on tik!"

This is how Evita Bezuidenhout (Pieter-Dirk Uys) described Suzman's persistence.

Uys, who was not present, made a special recording for the memorial service.

"Eventually the Nats got so sick of hearing these words, that they decided to give in to her," he said.

Colin Eglin, the former Progressive Party leader, said Suzman had refused to be swayed or intimidated by parliament.

***"The Nats were returned election after election with increased majorities.***

***Waar is hulle nou? (Where are they now?) Those who hold on to power and are affected by arrogance, must know they are ultimately going to get their comeuppance, for, ultimately, power is service."***

"In parliament she was courageous and principled. She was lucid, clear and to the point. There was no doubt about where Helen stood. She didn't allow parliament to determine her agenda. She did not let them dilute her message."

Democratic Alliance leader Helen Zille said that during one of their last conversations Suzman told her: "I did what I could, where I was, with what I had," to which Zille had replied: "Helen, we will continue to follow your example."

She said that until her death, Suzman would offer her wise advice on how to handle political problems.

Former University of Cape Town vice-chancellor, Mamphele Ramphele, urged the public not to be complacent, to speak up and hold leaders accountable. "The best memorial we can build of Helen is to follow her example. We owe it to ourselves and our future generations to stand up and be counted as she was."

She condemned the corruption happening in the country.

## Nelson Mandela

*Tribute to Helen on her 90th birthday*

"For your role in the struggle against apartheid and in the building of democracy was an extraordinary one - one not easy to forget, and one that should never be forgotten.

"Many of us are enormously proud of you, and of what your life represents."



## Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu

"We owe her an immense debt. She was a true heroine who contributed to our country's peaceful transition when many predicted a racial bloodbath."



## Winnie Madikizela-Mandela

She recalled how Suzman had been the first person to visit her in "exile" in the small Free State town of Brandfort, sent there by the apartheid government.

"She would walk up and down those dusty township streets with me... she never got tired," she said.

Madikizela-Mandela also lauded Suzman for her courageous battle to improve the conditions under which political prisoners, including Nelson Mandela, were kept. She credited "the woman who fought alone" for saving Mandela's life, exposing how he was kept in a waterlogged cell, which worsened his asthma.



## Nadine Gordimer

"I think she was a remarkable woman with a great sense of character. We disagreed politically but I respected her tremendously. One was very fortunate to have known her and witness her strong, witty personality."



## Patricia de Lille

*Independent Democrats leader*

"The fact that Helen Suzman lived such a long, productive and compassionate life does not take any of my deep sadness away - it is difficult to imagine our country without her."



**Dame Helen Suzman.  
For all those starfish you made a difference to...**

**Thank You.**



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## SAJR pays tribute to Helen

All the staff at the South African Jewish Report are proud to produce this feature in honour of fighter for human rights, Helen Suzman, who we have admired for so many years.

*An icon in her own lifetime.*

Geoff Sifrin - Editor

## Mamphelle Ramphela

Former UCT vice chancellor and anti-apartheid activist.



"She was also strategic in using the pretence at democracy and respect for the rule of law under apartheid to challenge the idea that the executive and legislative arms of government were entitled to act with scant regard for justice against those not represented in parliament." She made herself accountable to all South Africans, especially those whose voices were silenced.

Ramphela said Suzman took it upon herself to act as the public representative of the voiceless majority in a passionate, reasoned and effective manner. She pointed out that Suzman by her own account had been a product of a racist, chauvinistic and apathetic family and society.

"She was a free spirit long before the advent of our formal democracy in 1994."

Added Ramphela: "Suzman was a hard worker. As a

lone opposition MP for many years, she was able to take on the National Party juggernaut by outperforming them on all fronts."

## Dr Frederik van Zyl Slabbert

Former leader of the Opposition



One of the unforgettable moments in Parliament for me was when Helen was going full throttle at taking on the Government. I was in the front bench with her. Her petticoat belt snapped and the petticoat fell to the floor. Without batting an eyelid or pausing for breath, she stepped out of her fallen petticoat and continued her attack uninterrupted.

At the end of it, she calmly bent down, picked up the petticoat and with it in her handbag, bowed to the Speaker and walked out. There was no laughter, just looks of pure admiration for her poise and presence.

Somehow this incident epitomised Helen in Parliament for me: Presence, Poise and Passion.

There were some Nats who simply could not cope with her and the moment she stood up to talk, they started baying like puppies seeing the moon for the first time. If I have to single out anyone who spoke truth to power unreservedly, it was Helen Suzman. She had an instinctive sense of justice and a deep loathing of racist hypocrisy.

I got to Parliament when Helen had been there for 13 years and on becoming leader of the Opposition, shared a front bench with her. It was a privilege to have her as my mentor and I learnt a great deal about Parliamentary conventions and procedure from her.

## Kgalema Motlanthe



Suzman loathed ostentation and pomposity. That's why a state funeral for her was ruled out. She had wanted to be buried privately. But President Kgalema Motlanthe did order the national flag to be flown half-mast in her honour on the day of her funeral.

Her erstwhile colleague, Frederik van Zyl Slabbert said about the government suggestion of a state funeral, that knowing the type of person Suzman was, she would never have expected such a tribute. "I think her attitude towards something like that would be to laugh it off," he said.

## Former President FW de Klerk



Although he and Suzman had differed on many issues, it had always been in a good spirit. "She played a central role in South Africa's political history, for which she deserves a place of honour.

De Klerk pointed out that his friendship with Suzman dated back long before the reforms he instituted in South African politics. He recalled her "wonderful sense of humour". Once when he jokingly said she had become a Nat, she answered: "No, you have become a Prog."

## Benjamin Pogrund

Former Rand Daily Mail deputy editor



I had a close working relationship with her. For several years I was the African Affairs reporter on the *Rand Daily Mail*, reporting day by day about black existence and politics.

It was usually difficult to get information from government officials. So I would write to Helen in Cape Town - it was long before the era of e-mails and easy telephoning - and tell her what I wanted to know, whether about gross educational deficiencies in Alexandra township, or the harshness of the pass laws, or problems with minging old-age pensions in Soweto, or lousy hospitals, or administrative cruelty in a "homeland", or whatever. Helen would draft questions, put them to the appropriate minister, and send me the replies, which I then used for reports in the *Mail*.

She was also a crucial and ceaseless source of comment for the *Rand Daily Mail*. Any apartheid event, any ugly government action, and we turned to Helen to ask her views. She always responded quickly, always zeroing in on the nub of the issue, attacking and castigating the government intelligently and knowledgeably, using words that ordinary readers could understand.

## Jacob Zuma

ANC president



"Helen Suzman made an important contribution towards exposing the evils of apartheid. Her concern for the plight of political prisoners was appreciated in the country and worldwide, and her contribution to the debate on the creation of a constitutional democracy was valuable."



**Xolela Mancgu***(Business Day columnist and political analyst)*

Not long ago I participated in a panel convened by the Helen Suzman Foundation. I argued that even though they lived worlds apart, Steve Biko and Suzman shared what Hannah Arendt calls courage.

In her essay "What is Freedom", Arendt recalls Winston Churchill's description of courage as "the first of human qualities, because it is the quality which guarantees all others".

Biko was courageous in a revolutionary sense, to the extent of giving up his own life. But before he gave up his life he wrote about how "fear erodes the soul of black people" but also how fear dehumanised white people:

Suzman never allowed the fear in the white community to imprison her. As a sole member of the opposition in parliament she withstood sexist ridicule from members of the ruling National Party. She visited prisoners such as Nelson Mandela (on Robben Island), and fought the good fight for Robert Sobukwe - who was kept on Robben Island by an Act of Parliament.

Suzman exposed the bestiality of the apartheid regime while developing deep personal relationships in ways that transcended politics.

Simply put, she cared.

**Mosiua Lekota***Former Minister of Defence and co-founder of the Congress of the People.*

*(This tribute appeared in Focus 48 in 2007, published by the Helen Suzman Foundation)*

When I received the invitation to contribute some reflections on Mrs Suzman, I paused and wondered what to say.

She had not been a guerrilla, not a returning exile, prisoner or former detainee without trial, had not been banned or house arrested, etc. All of which are some of the trademarks of most of the recognised opponents of apartheid.

Helen was different. Because her skin colour gave her access to a parliamentary seat, she campaigned to get into the lion's den and from there kept the attention of the nation and the world focused on the crime against the people of our country.

Daily she endured the abuse, the humiliation and hostility of her mostly male racist and chauvinist adversaries. Quite often the press carried reports indicating unprintable expletives directed towards Helen by then National Party members of Parliament, including, at times, Cabinet bigwigs.

In celebrating Helen's life we must celebrate the spirit of all those South Africans who gave something of themselves to bring us where we are today.

If Helen's contribution affirmed the conviction of our communities across the nation that a different and better dispensation awaited them in future, for us who served prison terms on Robben Island and elsewhere, her regular interventions and strident demands for the improvement of conditions under which we served our sentences, were of immense and immediate value.

Access to study, contact with families, periodic improvements of diet, better medical care (especially for the elderly among us) made endurance better than if conditions had remained crushingly brutal.

By helping to ameliorate our immediate circumstances, Helen gave a very big boost to our capacity to stay the distance in the drive towards the democratisation of our beloved country. Long live the heroic example of the life of Helen Suzman!

**Mangosuthu Buthelezi***(President of the Inkatha Freedom Party)*

The many tributes to Helen Suzman will record that she was one of the many people who were madly pulling at the ropes of apartheid inside and outside of South Africa.

Some have questioned if she was "right" to work within the apartheid structures. My retort would be: What was the alternative for Helen? She demonstrated raw courage in curbing some of the worst excesses of the apartheid government with her forensic parliamentary skills and relentless badgering of National Party politicians to, occasionally, do the right thing.

She also gave me unstinting encouragement when dallying with black politicians was not the

smartest thing to do.

This brings me directly on to what lessons we can learn for the future from Suzman's career. Her "impeccably informed gift of debate hits the bull's eye of apartheid laws", to quote her friend Nadine Gordimer. This places her in the dizzy ranks of the best parliamentary performers of all time.

She would have been as dazzling in Westminster, the mother of parliamentary democracy, as she was in the old South African parliament.

A tiny lady, but a lioness in stature, demonstrated the power of one who stands up to unjust laws and bullies.

One of the reasons that people like Mrs Suzman fought such a valiant fight was so that we could also do that most human of things: laugh. The best way we can pay tribute to this remarkable woman is by taking her life's work forward: standing up to bullies - in whatever guise they come.

**Rapport**

The Afrikaans paper, *Rapport*, pointed to the irony that many praise-singers at Suzman's death had been some of her fiercest slanderers when she was at her political peak. The paper said this irony would not have escaped Suzman with her sharp mind. Among her erstwhile besmirchers were former parliamentary opponents in the old regime, and as some embittered figures from the black community who labelled her a straw doll because she chose to fight apartheid from within the system - in parliament.

"With typical Suzman grace she never defended herself against revisionist hotheads who reproached her for not having followed the route of Bram Fischer and Joe Slovo in her fight against apartheid."

In her 36 years in parliament, she, woman alone "did more for the demise of apartheid than all the car bombs, limpet mines and landmines together".



Condolences  
from the board

We remember an inspirational woman  
with qualities of tenacity,  
compassion and determination.

You will be missed  
Helen



**Colin Eglin**

*(Twice leader of the [then] opposition Progressive Federal Party - before and after the Van Zyl Slabbert era)*



Helen Suzman was a liberal. During the years 1961 to 1974, when civil liberties and the rule of law were under assault from the apartheid government, and

the official opposition was either compromising or capitulating, Helen, as the lone representative of the Progressive Party, singlehandedly stood up against detention without trial, spoke out against oppression, and fought for civil liberties and the rule of law.

She was a liberal, but she was no arm-chair crusader. She was a "hands-on" politician and a tenacious fighter for the causes in which she believed. Helen was a liberal, but she was no political ideologue. For her, people, not dogma, came first.

She had a straightforward political creed: "I hate bullies. I stand for simple justice, equal opportunity and human rights. These are the indispensable elements in a democratic society and are well worth fighting for."

She confronted bullies like Verwoerd, Vorster and Botha head on.

When, in Parliament, on June 19 1986, the pass laws, which Helen had opposed so vigorously from the time she came to Parliament in 1953, were repealed, and members gathered around to congratulate her, I was reminded of the moving words spoken by Senator Robert Kennedy in his address to the young people of South Africa at the University of Cape Town on June 6 1966.

"Few of us will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each one of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation.

"Each time a man stands for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope.

"And crossing each other from a million centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance."

Here in our South Africa, Helen Suzman has been a person who has stood for an ideal, who has acted to improve the lot of others, who has struck out against injustice.

**The Hon A E Abrahamson**

*(Former Rhodesian Cabinet minister and also chairman of the board of SA Jewish Report)*



Helen's parliamentary career from 1953 to 1989 embraced South Africa's darkest years of racial oppressions and the experiment of apartheid. She lit up the darkness from time to time by her courage and challenging voice. She accepted the need for a progressive party of opposition to replace the "me too" attitude of the United Party.

To be in opposition with the support of fellow members is more acceptable than to become the lone voice for 13 years. However, her lone voice was often an advantage to represent the fresh approach that Helen brought to Parliament and to South Africa, and to show the world that there were contrary views of tolerance and humanity.

She was never a starry-eyed liberal,

but a caring and practical progressive. She opposed sanctions being imposed against South Africa because its main effect on the mass of the population did not serve the purpose of its imposition.

She first visited Robben Island in 1967. Meeting Nelson Mandela for the first time, she was impressed by his dignified approach, seeking avenues of reconciliation which might be available if the suspension of violence and a negotiating process led to a new South Africa.

She has always acknowledged her origins from where the cry for social justice emanated some thousands of years ago.

And she has steadfastly supported the claim of the Jewish people for peace and security in the land of Israel.

**John Kane-Berman**

*CEO SA Institute of Race Relations*



Many years ago a distinguished Englishman by the name of Sir Robert Birley described Helen Suzman as the "greatest parliamentarian in the world". The

accolade came from someone who knew what he was talking about. As headmaster of Eton, Birley had moulded many a British MP, and no doubt a couple of dozen Cabinet ministers too.

One can feel almost sorry for the poor Nats as, day in and day out, they had to listen as she spoke truth to power right there under their very noses.

When she was on her own as the only Progressive MP, and often because the stance of the official opposition was little different from that of the government, Helen was sometimes the sole dissenting voice on legislation.

Brave this certainly was; less widely recognised, perhaps, is how much homework it required. She had to master the detail of a far wider range of legislation than is normally required of an MP.

Effectiveness as a parliamentarian went even further. Facts had to be dug out and double-checked when half the Cabinet and half the backbenchers behind them were waiting to catch you out and hurl abuse. So there had to be plenty of research as well as those famous visits to "go and see for yourself". That is why, she says: "They could never really catch me out."

**The SA Zionist Federation**

"Mrs Suzman was one of South Africa's most respected, loved and admired figures, a principled woman of the highest integrity who fought for the rights of the underprivileged, as the lone opposition Member of Parliament for 13 years."

**Raenette Taljaard**

*Director: Helen Suzman Foundation*



Helen would speak on every contentious issue and always wrote her own speeches. Some words, taken from her early letters: "Those of us who can still speak up have a moral obligation so to do. And I intend to exercise my so-called parliamentary privilege to the last day."

She was determined to be accessible (to everyone who approached her for help). This meant having a listed telephone number, despite threatening calls in the middle of the night. And this meant receiving people who would arrive unannounced at the front door. Her house had no gates at all.

Helen knew only too well that when addressing Parliament she was also addressing the outside world, since anything published in Hansard could be reported in the press.

Helen's hallmark was her insistence on seeing for herself. On hearing of some crisis or person in trouble, she would grab her car keys and drive off to lend support and to intervene, no matter how distant, how dangerous or how difficult the situations.

To the delight of all gathered, they heard Helen's characteristic voice on her 90th birthday: "My dad, Sam Gavronsky, was once asked by a friend, how is Helen. My father smiled and said, 'Helen is meschugge'. I inherited inter alia his stamina and his sense of humour, without which I could never have survived all those years in Parliament.

"But you know, some very anti-Semitic letters used to arrive. Strangely I got one the other day, too; you would think I was still involved. I got one of these nasty little letters, but it really was funny. It was just a postcard with nothing on it at all, except 'the Yiddisher know-all from Houghton'. These things flew into my postbox like homing pigeons..."

**The Saturday Star**

In an editorial with the title "Courage was her name", *Saturday Star* spoke about the reams of copy written of Helen Suzman's "tireless and lonely fight as a well-to-do white woman for the rights of all South Africans in a parliament which universally feared, if not actually loathed, her.

"She did so at a time when the great majority of white South Africans were content to turn a blind eye to the way their black, coloured, Asian and Chinese brothers and sisters were being treated, shutting up to enjoy the illegal fruits of a hideous racist society."

**Achmat Dangor**

*Chief executive of the Nelson Mandela Foundation*



"Our country has lost a great patriot and a fearless fighter against apartheid.

"When, as president of South Africa, Mr Mandela bestowed

upon Mrs Suzman the Order of Meritorious Service (Gold) in 1997, he commented upon her courage, saying: 'It is a courage born of the yearning for freedom; of hatred of oppression, injustice and inequity whether the victim be oneself or another; a fortitude that draws its strength from the conviction that no person can be free while others are unfree'."

**Irene Menell**

Helen Suzman's long-time friend and colleague, Irene Menell, said: "I will remember Helen as an incredible woman, for her wit and integrity. She really epitomised every aspect of integrity in her life."

Menell recalled how she and Suzman used to go out on foot canvassing voters ahead of elections while working for the Progressive Party.

"We had a wonderful series of experiences during our campaigning for elections. She was marvellous with the comments that she made to people. She appreciated the people in her constituency. She was good at planning everything and meticulous in her demands."



*Daughter Frances said her mother once wrote to her towards the end of a particularly gruelling parliamentary session:*

*"The thought of leading a fairly normal life is too gorgeous for words."*

*But what is normal?*

*To Helen a normal life was always active, committed, involved. And since her so-called retirement, she continued unabated, vigorously taking up cases of injustice, visiting prisons, entering political controversy and generally continuing to play an independent role. Always calling the shots as she saw them and never courting popularity.*

**PHOTO CREDIT:** The pictures on page I, II and III were provided by the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies at UCT. They are from an exhibition "Helen Suzman. Fighter for Human Rights", first mounted at the SA Jewish Museum in 2005 and soon to be on display at the Apartheid Museum. Millie Pimstone was responsible for the concept, research and text of the exhibition and Linda Bester for design and digital artwork.