

# HELEN'S AN APPR

Helen Suzman, the liberal member of the old South African parliament, renowned for her courageous and unrelenting fight for human rights and justice, died peacefully in her home in Johannesburg in the small hours of New Year's Day 2009. Her Liberalism was more than a political creed; it was a state of mind, a way of life, a responsibility towards others. **Colin Eglin**, a co-founder of the anti-apartheid Progressive Party, recalls her.



# SUZMAN ECAIATION

THE EXPRESSIONS of grief at her death, of respect for her person, and of gratitude for her life and her service that came from all sections of the South African people and from representatives all political parties were testimony to the impact she had made on the politics of South Africa and on the lives of its citizens.

Helen served in parliament from 1953 to 1989, the years during which successive National Party governments were imposing the policy of apartheid on the people of South Africa. Apartheid deeply offended Helen's sense of justice and violated the liberal values that she embraced. She was angry at the hurt it was doing to millions of her fellow citizens, and at the damage it was doing to the fabric of South African society.

She spoke out against racial discrimination, against race classification, group areas, job reservation, and detention without trial. She campaigned for the repeal of the Pass Laws. She condemned the abuse of power. She worked for a South Africa in which there would be freedom of expression, the rule of law, an independent

judiciary, transparent governance, and an open society in which individuals would be free to make choices. She campaigned for the abolition of the death penalty. She fought for human rights.

During the dark days of apartheid she did more than any other person to keep liberal values alive. Indeed, South Africa's new democratic constitution, with the liberal values that it embraces, is testimony to the inspirational impact that Helen's work and example made on the politics of South Africa

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Helen Suzman was born in Germiston, a small mining town a few kilometres from Johannesburg, on the day of the Russian Revolution, 7 November 1917. Her father, Samuel Gavronsky, and his brother Oscar had emigrated from a small Jewish village in Lithuania and in due course married two sisters who had also emigrated from Eastern Europe. The Gavronsky brothers, who on their arrival in South Africa could speak neither English nor Dutch, went into business together. In due course they prospered and

invested in land, property and other businesses

Samuel Gavronsky, wanting the best available schooling for his two daughters, arranged for Helen and her sister Gertrude to go to Parktown Convent, a Catholic school for girls. Upon completing her schooling Helen enrolled at Witwatersrand University to study for the degree of Bachelor of Commerce.

She interrupted her studies in 1937 when she married Mosie Suzman, an eminent physician from a large and well-known Jewish family in Johannesburg. Helen and Mosie moved into a spacious new home and took part in the social and cultural life of the relatively prosperous community. They had two daughters, Frances, born in September 1939, and Patricia, born in January 1943.

In the Second World War Mosie joined up to the South African Medical Corps and was posted to serve in Egypt. Helen completed her Bachelor of Commerce course at Witwatersrand University in a year and, on applying to join up she was assigned to a position with the War Supplies Board. In 1945, after the war, Helen returned to

Helen Suzman  
MP (1917–2009)

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Witwatersrand University, first to take up a tutorship and then to become a lecturer on economic history. During this period she joined the South African Institute of Race Relations.

In 1946 the Institute asked her to assist in preparing evidence that it could present to the Fagan Commission, which had been established by General Smuts, then Prime Minister, under Judge Henry Fagan to review the laws that applied to the Blacks in the urban areas. These laws, commonly known as the 'Pass Laws', were based on a policy that went back to 1922; the laws allowed Blacks to come to the urban areas when their services were required by the Whites, but had return to the Native Reserves when the

Helen Suzman  
Top: In her office,  
while an MP.  
Bottom: At a  
mass funeral.

Whites no longer required their services.

Helen was appalled by what she learned of the disastrous impact these inhuman laws had on Black individuals, their families, and their communities. The Fagan Commission recommended a new approach, namely that the pervaded urbanisation of Blacks should be recognised and should be accommodated within the law. However before Smuts could act on this recommendation he and his party were ousted from power in May 1948 by the pro-apartheid National Party.

Helen was shocked. The Pass Laws were not only going to stay, they were going to be enforced even more harshly. But more than this: where was South Africa

heading? Governed by a political party that had opposed the war effort, that harboured many people who had been pro-Nazi, and that was committed to enforce the policy of apartheid in the political, economic, educational, and social life in South Africa?

She reacted by becoming actively involved in politics. She joined the United Party, served on a constituency committee and became heavily involved as the Information Officer of the Witwatersrand Women's Council of the party. She stood as a United Party candidate in the 1953 election and was elected unopposed as the Member of Parliament for Houghton, a position that she held continuously until she retired in September 1989.

When Helen came to Cape Town for her first parliamentary session she became a member of a caucus of a United Party that was confused in trying to define an identity relevant to the politics of post-war South Africa; the party was divided on the issue of an alternative to the Nationalist policy of apartheid.

Helen was soon identified as an outspoken member of the 'liberal group' in the caucus. She and a caucus colleague defied the party's decision to vote for the Separate Amenities Bill by walking out of the House when the Bill was put to the vote. She was one of the group of liberal backbenchers who declared their commitment to restore Coloured voters to the common voters roll (from which the Nationalist government was removing them), at a time when the leadership of the party was trying to avoid taking a stand on this issue.

Helen's maiden speech in parliament was on women's rights, and she went on to take part in every debate that affected women's rights during her thirty-six years in parliament. However she emphasised that while the issue of women's rights still had to be dealt with, the issue of race discrimination and the denial of rights to Black South Africans was the matter of overriding concern.

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Helen and I first met in June 1954 at a lunch arranged by Tony

Delius, the poet, author and parliamentary correspondent of the *Cape Times*. She was completing her second year as MP for Houghton, while I was about to become a member of the Cape Provincial Council. I found her to be very attractive, physically, politically and intellectually. I realised that behind her sparkling blue eyes there was a sharp mind and a tough will. We seemed to be on the same political wavelength, and to share the same judgment of the political players of that time. That lunch marked the start of a personal friendship and a mutually supportive relationship that lasted for more than fifty years during which we worked together in liberal opposition politics both inside and outside parliament.

Over the years I came to appreciate her keen intellect, to understand her commitment to principle, her intolerance of hypocrisy, her scorn for position-seekers, and her concern for people. I also came to realise that she did not suffer fools gladly, but she had a great sense of fun.

She was a warm and generous hostess, and loved her home, with its garden and her dogs. Her home was the focal point of her domestic, social and a large part of her political life. It was there that she entertained friends and house guests, had interviews with the media or discussions with people who had come from afar to meet her. It was here that she issued statements or worked the telephone lines. It was here that she attended to the many people who knocked on her door to seek her assistance or her intervention in their suffering under the discriminatory laws and regulations of the apartheid government.

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When, after the general election of 1958, I joined Helen in the United Party's parliamentary caucus, I learned at first hand that she was one of the most outspoken of a group of liberal members who were trying to move the party away from policies based on racial discrimination and to face up to the future of a multiracial South Africa.

It came as no surprise that at the very tense National Congress

of the United Party in August 1959, Helen was one of the focal points of the conservatives' onslaught on the liberals. This came to a head when, at the behest of the conservatives, the congress adopted a resolution through which the party reneged on an undertaking it had given to provide land for 'native settlement.' Helen was one of nine of us public representatives who met that evening and issued a statement condemning the congress resolution, knowing that our action would lead to our expulsion or resignation from the party.

A week later, a number of liberals who had resigned from the party met in Helen's Johannesburg home to form a 'progressive group' with the intention of developing it into a liberal anti-apartheid political party. The Progressive Party was launched in November 1959 at a Congress held in Johannesburg. Dr Jan Steytler MP was elected Leader and Helen was amongst its founder members. As one of the twelve members of the new Progressive Party parliamentary caucus, Helen played an important role in helping to shape party policy and to establish the party's identity as an outspoken opponent of apartheid and as a custodian of liberal values.

At the 1961 election, which Prime Minister Dr Verwoerd called two years earlier than scheduled. Helen was the only progressive to win a seat. During the next thirteen years, 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 single-handedly stood up against detention without trial, spoke out against racial discrimination and fought for civil liberties and the rule of law.

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She was courageous, she was principled. When she spoke she was clear, lucid and to the point. No obfuscation, no ambiguity, no spin; there was never any doubt where Helen stood on issues.

She was a liberal, but she was no armchair crusader. She was a

'hands on' politician and a tenacious fighter for the causes she believed in. She made sure of her facts. She went to see for herself.

She visited prisons, spoke to political prisoners and detainees and saw the conditions in which they were held. She went to find out what was happening in the squatter camps. She spoke to people being harassed under the Pass Laws or being evicted from their homes under the Group Areas Act.

Armed with first-hand information she returned to the fray, questioning harassing, badgering the apartheid ministers and bureaucrats. Using parliament as a platform she demanded the attention of the apartheid rulers, she got the ear of the media, she endured the vilification of the racial bigots, she earned the respect of the oppressed.

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 Prime Ministers Verwoerd and Vorster and President Botha head on. Through her actions and the arguments that she advanced she demonstrated that liberal values were not abstract concepts, but that they formed the basis of good government and of a wholesome society.

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Helen's lone years in parliament ended on 24 April 1974 when five more members of the Progressive Party, including myself, were elected to parliament. This breakthrough, after three successive drubbings at the polls, was a watershed event for the development of liberal values in South Africa – for Helen had informed me, as the party leader at that time, that if the party did not win any seats other than her seat of Houghton at the coming election she would resign from parliament.

For the next fifteen years Helen continued with her political work with the same energy and

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Helen Suzman  
with Nelson  
Mandela.

commitment, and with the same outspoken manner as before. She proved to be a great team player and played a pivotal role in ensuring that the party did not lose its liberal thrust as it grew, through amalgamations and electoral victories, from six to twenty-seven members in parliament and became the official opposition in 1977.

Freed from the workload that she had when she was the sole representative of the Progressive Federal Party in parliament Helen was able to devote more of her energy to her work outside parliament. She continued to visit political prisoners and detainees. She visited anti-apartheid activists who had been banished to remote parts of the country. She took up the cases of people like Steve Biko and Neil Aggett who had died in controversial circumstances while being held by members of the Security Forces.

Her greatest triumph in parliament undoubtedly came on 19 June 1986, when the National Assembly passed a Bill repealing the Pass Laws that Helen had fought against throughout her political career. After the Speaker had announced the result and members of the party caucus had crowded around Helen to congratulate her, two young

members of the National Party left their benches on the government's side and, to everyone's surprise, walked across the floor to shake Helen's hand and to thank her for what she had done. Helen had won at last.

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When, during the 1980s and 1990s in particular, the international community became increasingly concerned about and involved in the issue of apartheid in South Africa, international organisations, governments, political movements, religious organisations, and civic bodies recognised Helen Suzman for her courageous struggle against apartheid and her unrelenting fight for human rights and justice in South Africa.

Among the many awards she received were the United Nations Award for Human Rights (1978), the Moses Mendelssohn Prize of the Berlin Senate (1988), Dame of the British Empire (1989), the Order of Meritorious Service (Gold) President Mandela (1997), and the Prize for Freedom of Liberal International (2002). She was twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Among the twenty-nine honorary doctorates conferred on her were five from South African universities. The balance was from universities around the world, including prominent universities such as Harvard, Yale and Columbia (United States of America), Oxford, Cambridge, Glasgow and Warwick (United Kingdom) and the University of Toronto (Canada).

After thirty-six years in parliament, Helen decided that the election due to be held in September 1989 would be an appropriate time for her to retire. She left parliament as she had done for thirty-six years, still fighting for justice as she persuaded the Speaker to allow her to bring a motion of censure against a judge who in her words, 'had given a derisory sentence to two white farmers who had beaten a Black employee to death'.

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On 2 February 1990, President F. W. de Klerk, to everyone's

surprise, announced that organisations such as the African National Congress and the Pan-Africanist Congress were to be unbanned, and that prisoners such as Nelson Mandela were to be freed; and also that the process of negotiating a new non-racial democratic constitution would commence. As I sat in parliament listening to De Klerk making that announcement my thoughts turned to Helen. I could imagine her thoughts and feelings. What a pity she was not there to share in the excitement of the moment!

Helen settled down to a life without parliament, but not without politics. Although she did not have the same access to the government service as she did when she was a member of parliament she interceded in respect of the cases that were bought to her attention. She issued statements to the press. She responded to requests from the media for her opinion on topical issues. While apartheid was no longer the issue, Helen spoke out in no uncertain terms when someone in authority acted in a way that violated her sense of justice or abused their power.

Although Helen was not directly involved in the negotiation of the new constitution, she followed developments around the negotiations closely, and was frequently in touch with me, as the Democratic Party's chief negotiator, asking me questions, expressing opinions or giving me advice.

In 1991 the party invited Helen to join its delegation to the first plenary session of the Congress for a Democratic South Africa (Codesa), the multi-party body negotiating the new constitution. In a two-minute intervention, Helen pointed out that, although the text of the statement before the delegates referred a commitment to non-racialism and non-sexism, less than 10 percent of delegates were women. Helen's political acumen and the respect that people had for her became apparent when Codesa promptly resolved that all future delegations had to have an equal number of women and men!

In 1991 Helen was elected as the President of the South African Institute of Race Relations, and in 1994 she was appointed as

one of the five members of the Independent Electoral Commission which supervised South Africa's first democratic election. In 1996 the Helen Suzman Foundation, committed to promoting liberal democracy, was founded.

Over the years since Helen first met Nelson Mandela, when visiting the prison on Robben Island where he was held, the two of them developed a friendship founded on mutual respect and understanding. This did not prevent her telling him quite frankly when at times she disagreed with him or with something his government was doing.

In 1997 President Mandela, at a ceremony in Pretoria, awarded Helen and three distinguished men the Decoration for Meritorious Service (Gold), then South Africa's highest civilian award. At the commencement of the

ceremony, having said that he was honoured to confer the award on these four great South Africans, he added, 'But I must tell you that in respect of three of them I decided with my head. In respect of the fourth I decided with my heart. I won't tell you that fourth is, but she gives me a lot of trouble!'

In awarding Helen the Decoration President Mandela referred to her courage: '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.'

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Helen Suzman was a great parliamentarian, but one of a

special kind. She did not allow parliament to determine her agenda. Nor did she allow the ritual nature or ambiance of parliament to dilute her message. In fact, Helen was more than a parliamentarian. She was a political activist who, with consummate courage and skill, used parliament to get her message across.

Helen Suzman was a great South African liberal. Her greatness was founded, not on any grand design, or great speech, or momentous event, but on a commitment to a set of basic liberal values combined with a multitude of single acts of courage and caring.

For Helen liberalism was more than a political creed. It was a state of mind, a way of life, a responsibility towards others, a commitment to justice.

Her legacy lives on.

*Colin Wells Eglin was born in Cape Town on 14 April 1925. He served with the Sixth South African Armoured Division in Italy during the Second World War. Elected to the South African Parliament as a member of the United Party in 1958, in 1959, together with ten colleagues, including Helen Suzman, he resigned from the United Party to form the liberal anti-apartheid Progressive Party. He served in parliament until 1961, and then again from 1974–2004; for ten years during the 1970s and '80s he was the leader of the Progressive Party and its successors. Following the release of Nelson Mandela, Eglin played a key role in the constitutional negotiations that led to the adoption of South Africa's new democratic constitution; Mandela described Eglin as 'one of the architects of our democracy'. He is the author of Crossing the Borders of Power – The Memoirs of Colin Eglin (2007).*

## RESEARCH IN PROGRESS

If you can help any of the individuals listed below with sources, contacts, or any other information — or if you know anyone who can — please pass on details to them. Details of other research projects in progress should be sent to the Editor (see page 3) for inclusion here.

### Letters of Richard Cobden (1804–65)

Knowledge of the whereabouts of any letters written by Cobden in private hands, autograph collections, and obscure locations in the UK and abroad for a complete edition of his letters. (For further details of the Cobden Letters Project, please see [www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/projects/cobden](http://www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/projects/cobden)). Dr Anthony Howe, School of History, University of East Anglia, Norwich NR4 7TJ; [a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk](mailto:a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk).

### The Lib-Lab Pact

The period of political co-operation which took place in Britain between 1977 and 1978; PhD research project at Cardiff University. Jonny Kirkup, 29 Mount Earl, Bridgend, Bridgend County CF31 3EY; [jonnykirkup@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:jonnykirkup@yahoo.co.uk).

### 'Economic Liberalism' and the Liberal (Democrat) Party, 1937–2004

A study of the role of 'economic liberalism' in the Liberal Party and the Liberal Democrats. Of particular interest would be any private papers relating to 1937's *Ownership For All* report and the activities of the Unservile State Group. Oral history submissions also welcome. Matthew Francis; [matthew@the-domain.org.uk](mailto:matthew@the-domain.org.uk).

### The Liberal Party's political communication, 1945–2002

Research on the Liberal party and Lib Dems' political communication. Any information welcome (including testimonies) about electoral campaigns and strategies. Cynthia Messeleka-Boyer, 12 bis chemin Vaysse, 81150 Tressac, France; +33 6 10 09 72 46; [cynthia.boyer@univ-jfc.fr](mailto:cynthia.boyer@univ-jfc.fr).

### Liberal policy towards Austria-Hungary, 1905–16

Andrew Gardner, 17 Upper Ramsey Walk, Canonbury, London N1 2RP; [agardner@ssees.ac.uk](mailto:agardner@ssees.ac.uk).

### Liberal Unionists

A study of the Liberal Unionist party as a discrete political entity. Help with identifying party records before 1903 particularly welcome. Ian Cawood, Newman University College, Birmingham; [i.cawood@newman.ac.uk](mailto:i.cawood@newman.ac.uk).

### The Liberal Party in the West Midlands December 1916 – 1923 election

Focusing on the fortunes of the party in Birmingham, Coventry, Walsall and Wolverhampton. Looking to explore the effects of the party split at local level. Also looking to uncover the steps towards temporary reunification for the 1923 general election. Neil Fisher, 42 Bowden Way, Binley, Coventry CV3 2HU; [neil.fisher81@ntlworld.com](mailto:neil.fisher81@ntlworld.com).

### Recruitment of Liberals into the Conservative Party, 1906–1935

Aims to suggest reasons for defections of individuals and develop an understanding of changes in electoral alignment. Sources include personal papers and newspapers; suggestions about how to get hold of the papers of more obscure Liberal defectors welcome. Clr Nick Cott, 1a Henry Street, Gosforth, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, NE3 1DQ; [N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:N.M.Cott@ncl.ac.uk).

### The political career of Edward Strutt, 1st Baron Belper

Strutt was Whig/Liberal MP for Derby (1830–49), later Arundel and Nottingham; in 1856 he was created Lord Belper and built Kingston Hall (1842–46) in the village of Kingston-on-Soar, Notts. He was a friend of Jeremy Bentham and a supporter of free trade and reform, and held government office as Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Commissioner of Railways. Any information, location of papers or references welcome. Brian Smith; [brian63@inbox.com](mailto:brian63@inbox.com)