

Extra Mural Activities



DURING THE BOUMAT YEARS my interest in three unrelated non-business activities had peaked and resulted in my chairmanship of the national executive committee of the South African Institute of Race Relations, the chairmanship of the Board of Governors of Redhill School, and my election as a Board member and Trustee of the Market Theatre Foundation.

The Institute had been a part of my life since my return to Durban, and I was completely at one with its guiding principle of non-racialism, its public and vocal opposition to the doctrine of apartheid, and its research activities, for many years unique in South Africa, to back up its principles.

When I moved to Johannesburg, I again became active and was soon elected to the Finance and Executive Committees, then under the chairmanship of Ernie Wentzel. A new Director, John Kane-Berman, had just been appointed, and I was asked to become deputy-chairman to Ernie, a position which I accepted until his untimely death when I found myself – unexpectedly – the new Chairman. I held this position for six years under four remarkable Presidents – Rev. Stanley Mogoba, Rev. Dladla, Prof. Wiseman Nkuhlu and Helen Suzman.

They were fascinating and difficult years, spanning the last paroxysms of apartheid and the beginnings of the negotiations that led to its demise and the release of Nelson Mandela and the political prisoners. The Institute was in those years at the height of both its unpopularity with the Government and its influence with its opponents. We were being very closely watched, monitored, and occasionally threatened, but simultaneously we were regarded as the prime source of social and political information. The Institute was the automatic first port of call for any visiting dignitary or researcher seeking enlightenment about the complex and rapidly changing South African scene.

The Director, John Kane-Berman, was superb, an excellent speaker and writer with an incisive intelligence and an encyclopaedic knowledge

of South Africa. We became close friends and worked happily and effectively in joint harness for many years. Sadly, that joint effort and friendship began to falter at the end of the apartheid era, and eventually broke. John had a close relationship and admiration with and for Gatsha Buthelezi, and was becoming what Margaret Legum memorably called a "liberal fundamentalist". He abhorred the violence of the liberation struggle, believed that its objectives could have been achieved without violence and sanctions, blamed the Churches for the climate of violence that was sweeping the country, and was increasingly opposed to the ANC. I found myself to be diametrically opposed to John on all of these issues. I distrusted and disliked Buthelezi; I believed in the doctrine of a just war and that liberation would not have been achieved without the armed struggle, and that the Churches' stance had been the only correct moral one. The final break in our relationship came with the advent of what first appeared to be random violence in commuter trains and hostels, but which was later shown to be an organised "third force". John refused to accept this and campaigned vocally against this evidence. I found that he had moved further and further towards conservatism, whilst I had moved in the opposite direction and had in fact joined the ANC.

It had obviously become impossible for us to continue to work together and I resigned as Chairman and from the Institute. It was a sad and final break after an adult lifetime of involvement. My resignation caused a minor flurry. Helen Suzman, whom I had persuaded to become President, was not pleased that I had left her in an uncomfortable situation. Ken Owen wrote a typically venomous piece in which I was called an ANC lap-dog! As is not unusual, he has done an 180° turn. Happily, Helen and I are again fast friends.

In parallel with the Institute, I had been involved with the Market Theatre for many years and was delighted to be asked to become a Trustee and a member of its finance and management committees. The early trials of the Market are well-known. We fought the apartheid laws and were constantly on the brink of insolvency. Barney Simon, Manny Manim and John Kani were the indefatigable survivors. I have greatly enjoyed my involvement despite the many problems and now my direct involvement has ended. Under a new approach by Government, which is of course the major financial supporter, the Market has been classified as a cultural institution under a Board appointed by the Minister. I indicated that I would not seek re-appointment.

My third extra-mural activity during these years was a greatly rewarding stint as a Trustee, and then Chairman, of the Redhill School Trust. All four of our children were at Redhill and I thus had a natural

interest in and affinity for the school. It had begun as a private girls' school, then was transformed by Isaac Kriel and Max Witt into a co-educational nursery, primary and high school, owned by a Trust. There were the inevitable early problems of finance and staffing but I am satisfied that I left the Redhill Chair with a well-staffed and financially secure school and one that was moving rapidly towards an integrated pupil body. Achieving that was not always easy. Parents of school children are renowned for being difficult; teaching staff are naïve and parochial; the corridors of school power and politics are Byzantine; government involvement and financing is tricky; fund-raising is a nightmare; the PTA always think that it can do better! Nevertheless, it was often fun, and very satisfying, and I am delighted to have been in a position to put something back into a school that had so successfully educated our four sons and to have been of some assistance to Jeremy Barnes, the talented headmaster, during those years.

I retired from the Trust the year after our youngest son, Peter, matriculated. I have always had a strong conviction that school trustees or governors should have a child at the school. This brings a close appreciation of the school's activities and problems although it is necessary to try to avoid subjectivity. I would not have been able to operate successfully without that involvement and knowledge.

Finally, as I have recorded elsewhere, I have always been involved in constituency politics, working in numerous election campaigns, first for the old United Party and then for the "Progs", culminating in my activities in the successful Gordon Waddell campaign and then my ongoing chairmanship of the Johannesburg North constituency. This involvement has now ended, not only because of my membership of the ANC, but because the demise of constituency elections has taken most of the fun and personal interest out of elections that are now, for me, sterile and impersonal. We had great fun and satisfaction at constituency level in the promotion of people whom we liked, respected, and were keen to work with for their election. There is some hope that those days may return.