

HELEN SUZMAN

One of the unforgettable moments in Parliament for me was when Helen was going full throttle at taking 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. Helen would be the first to admit that she was not a great political analyst, 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 learnt a great deal about Parliamentary conventions and procedure from her.

We both had the same conviction that the Parliament we served in was a racist institution and was inevitably going to disappear. We also

believed that it was one of many arenas that would hasten us all towards a new South Africa! Helen always jokingly said she had no idea what "the new South Africa" was going to be like, but was convinced it could never be worse than "the old South Africa". Whatever the case, Helen Suzman will be as critical of current injustices and racist hypocrisy as she has always been.

Dearly beloved "skone Helena" – Happy, Happy Birthday.

F VAN ZYL SLABBERT