

In The Mean Time - There was Helen Suzman:

Those who reflect on the way history is written i.e. philosophers of history, warn against two intellectual errors. The one is to err on the side of the Great man Theory of History, i.e. that history is shaped by extraordinary individuals irrespective of the social, economic and political circumstances they find themselves in. This is called Excessive Voluntarism. The other is called the Social Forces Theory of History, i.e. that individuals are simply the involuntary pawns of social, political and economic forces beyond their control. This is called excessive determinism. At the risk of being overly simplistic, most National Party leaders, during Apartheid, suffered from a heavy dose of excessive voluntarism, from DF Malan to FW de Klerk, they really believed they had South Africa by the throat and could shape history. Most leaders of the liberation movement suffered from a heavy dose of excessive determinism. They really believed that "History" was on their side and all they had to do was nudge events towards an inevitable victory.

Good modern historians avoid these analytical traps. They work on the assumption that there is an interactive relationship between individuals and the social, political and economic circumstances in which they find themselves. The challenge of good historiography is to give an account of this relationship. From this it follows that there is no final and uncontested account of the past. It is a question, as Karl Popper put it, of "conjecture and refutation", i.e. you put forward a hypothesis and then explore past events to see to what extent the hypothesis holds, or is rejected.

I first got to know Helen Suzman after the 1974 General Election when I and five others joined her as members of the white, racially dominated Parliament. By then she had been there for 13 years as the solitary representative of the Progressive Party. She had experienced the Premierships of Strijdom and Verwoerd and when we joined her in 1974 BJ Voster was Prime Minister, not a particularly jolly fellow but with a wry, sardonic sense of humour. He was succeeded by that penetrating investigative political mind PW Botha, who, when Verwoerd was assassinated by Tsafendas, rushed across the floor of Parliament and shoving his finger under her nose accused

Helen of having orchestrated the assassination, (I am reliably informed that Helen pleaded Parliamentary privilege to avoid prosecution). I resigned from Parliament in February 1986 when PW Botha was President. Helen and the P.F.P. caucus were not impressed and to this day old party stalwarts have difficulty in coming to terms with me. This is not the time to dwell on those events. Suffice to say, Helen and I made our peace and she is a revered and highly appreciated friend.

However, in the close to 13 years I was in Parliament, six of them next to Helen on the front bench, I tried to develop an understanding of what she had been though and what she had tried to do. The reason for my longwinded philosophical introduction was to make the point that Helen never suffered from excessive voluntarism, she had no delusions of grandeur and certainly did not for one moment think she could single handily change the course o South African history. At the same time she was also not an excessive determinist, she never accepted that the future was predetermined and that there is nothing any individual can do about the present. She passionately believed that individuals either singularly, or collectively, can and must respond to attacks on their liberty. In particular she vehemently disagreed with any person or party claiming the right to infringe on the liberty of others in pursuit of some exclusive goal or policy. To this day she does not accept that everything is possible and nothing is necessary, nor that because of necessity nothing is possible. She insists that we have the right and duty to explore all possibilities to protect and expand the civil liberties of ordinary citizens.

During her stay in Parliament she came through a very mean time in the history of our country. First she witnessed the implementation of the basic racist Acts of Apartheid, the Population Registration Act, the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, the Immorality Act, the Group Areas Act. Then the period of so-called separate development with the Homeland Authorities Act, the Urban Areas Consolidation Act (i.e. "Dompas" or Pass Laws). Each of these Acts was a frontal assault on the liberty of the majority of the people in this country. Separate development was nothing else but the massive denationalisation of the majority. It was excessive voluntarism gone mad.

Helen also witnessed the growing rebellion of ordinary people against the official policy. First the Sharpeville Massacre in 1961, the Rivonia Trial and growth of underground activities, June 16 and the riots of school children, of course accompanying these acts of resistance came the repressive laws to compel conformity. Detention without trial, 180 days, States of Emergency. This led to widespread arbitrary arrests, torture, a frenzy of capital punishment and pervasive state inspired murder of South African citizens. Eugene de Kock in his biography "A Long Night of Madness" confesses that he murdered at least 100 people and was twice decorated for meritorious service by the prevailing Minister of Police at functions at Vlakplaas. He is serving 212 years in prison whilst those who gave him commands and decorated him, strut around in the "new liberated South Africa".

As I said, it was a mean time in South Africa and through most of it Helen Suzman was in Parliament. She would be the first to say that it was not the only vantage point, or necessarily the best one, from which to oppose Apartheid. There were many extra-parliamentary organisations that fought with great courage against it, the Black Sash, student organisations, Azapo, ANC Youth, UDM and others. But there were a few strategic advantages; every Act that was opposed was recorded in HANSARD. Historians will have a field day reading the ridiculous ideological justifications for Apartheid, but also Helen's exposure and opposition to them. Through Parliamentary privilege Helen had complete freedom of access to the Diplomatic Community and international organisations. I have no doubt that this also added to the increasing international pressure on the Apartheid regime. She also used her position in Parliament to visit Robben Island and other prisons to observe first hand the conditions in them, and she was not backward in coming forward in talking about her experiences.

I am not going to give a ball by ball commentary on Helen Suzman's career in public life. A great deal has been written already, I simply wish to make a very self evident point. She did not have to do what she did, she did not do so out of some historical compulsion, nor because she thought she could change the world. She did so out of the choice available to her and because of a deep sense of moral outrage that racist policies were implemented to protect her and other

classified Whites at the expense of the majority of citizens in the country.

I know this is a controversial take on Helen's career in public life. The Nats in power hated her and always said she used Parliamentary privilege to grandstand and promote herself. Today the ANC in power tend to say the same thing. I did then, and do now, treat such attitudes with the utmost contempt.

It is more than comic that the party that Helen was part of, the D.A, is seen as the last vestiges of Apartheid, whilst the architects and foot soldiers of Apartheid, have collapsed their party and joined the ANC. The last leader of the once mighty NP is now opening B&B's in Soweto and checking for four by fours on the beaches for Thabo Mbeki. The NP leader who precipitated our transition has gone into self-imposed political oblivion and travels the world making speeches felled with excessive voluntarism.

South Africa is no longer going through a mean time. The present is infinitely preferable to the past. But we are going through a worrying time as far as the consolidation of our democracy is concerned. Official spokespersons acknowledge widespread corruption, fraud, theft and neglect of official duties at all three levels of government. It is not unreasonable to ask where are the public figures who enjoy the privileges of Parliament and public office who are prepared to put their careers and bodies on the line to combat these practices. I am not talking about some Black intellectuals, commentators and civil society organisations, such as TAC who do commendable work in this regard. I am talking about cabinet Minister, (even the President), MP's, Provincial and Local Counsellors who know first hand of the corruption of their colleagues and say and do nothing. Are they not using public office to grandstand and promote themselves?

In the meantime there was Helen Suzman and she was there at a very mean time in South Africa and she spoke up fearlessly and repeatedly. For that I and a great many others will always honour her.

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