

BUSINESS DAY

Monday, January 5 2009

Reality check

THE year has started on an upbeat note, with local shares and even the rand taking its cue from hopes that rescue packages will halt the first global recession since the Second World War. But it is far too soon for complacency, and many South Africans still seem to think that the domestic economy can be seen in isolation from the rest of the world. This gives rise to the flawed idea that there are steps which the government can take to avert job losses and spur growth, even as global demand for local exports wanes and investors flee emerging markets in droves.

The fact is SA is relatively well placed to ride out the shock waves generated by the global financial crisis, to which it has little direct exposure, thanks to sound regulation: economic growth slowed to a virtual halt in the third quarter of last year, but has not yet begun to contract, as is the case in the US, Europe, UK and Japan. But SA's crucial mining sector is in trouble, as prices for most of the country's mineral exports plunged last year, eroding corporate earnings. Many top miners have been forced to put expansion plans on ice and have warned they may need to retrench workers as output falls.

Enter the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu), with proposals to amend labour laws so that companies cannot fire their staff "at the first sign" of an economic downturn. This is ludicrous. It's not as if SA doesn't already have tough labour laws, which have often been cited as one of the main impediments to faster economic growth and job creation. And SA's economy had already started to slow before the global credit crunch struck late last year, pushing several of its main trade partners into a

recession, felling major international banks and leading to thousands of job cuts worldwide.

Cosatu seems to believe that local companies are chomping at the bit to axe staff at the first available opportunity, simply because it pleases them to do so. In fact, job cuts are so politically unpalatable in SA that the biggest companies will bend over backwards to avoid going that route if they possibly can. That is not a bad thing and mining giants might be able to afford it — for a while. But smaller companies will simply fold if they can't generate the earnings to pay their employees and make a profit. That means that instead of some staff being made redundant, all of them lose their jobs.

SA is not the only country grappling to come up with measures to stimulate the economy amid conflicting views on how best to do so. Germany's coalition government clashed yesterday over whether to pursue near-term tax cuts — backed by the conservatives — or to cut the fees which workers pay for pensions, health and unemployment insurance, supported by the centre-left Social Democrats. In Britain, Prime Minister Gordon Brown has pledged a government-funded public works programme to create up to 100 000 jobs and spending.

At the end of the day there is no set formula and each country must decide its own agenda. What is crucial is that decision makers set aside their ideology and do what will serve their economies best in the long term. There is no scope for either free-market capitalism or hard-core socialism in a world facing its biggest economic crisis in 80 years. It is clear that globally there must be stricter regulation — but SA has already made the grade in this department.

SECOND TAKE

JERUSALEM POST

SIX days into Israel's confrontation with Hamas, just one world leader has shown genuine understanding of our dilemma — George Bush.

Bush placed the onus for the hostilities where it belongs: "Hamas's continued rocket attacks into Israel must cease if the violence is to stop," his spokesman said.

With sirens wailing and the population of Israel's south absorbing blow after blow from Hamas gunners, this newspaper expresses its appreciation to Bush for his goodwill.

In just 18 days, Barack Obama will be sworn in as US president. We are reasonably confident the incoming administration will cut Hamas no more slack than the outgoing one. Sure, there will be those, like former state department official Aaron David Miller, who argue that by fighting Hamas, Israel is making "a difficult situation even tougher" and reducing the prospects for a durable Palestinian-Israeli agreement.

In fact, the opposite is the case. A

negotiated settlement requires Arabs and Israelis to want to live in peace. Hamas is uncompromisingly dedicated to pursuing a zero-sum struggle against Israel. No amount of territorial concessions, no matter how far-reaching, will make a Jewish state palatable to the Hamas fanatics.

Thus any policy predicated on bolstering the relative moderates in the Palestinian polity — Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayad, for example — must, logically, seek to chip away at those who denigrate them as Zionist collaborators. For 100 years, Palestinian politics has seen rejectionists assassinate those who voice any willingness to accommodate Jewish national aspirations.

Miller isn't entirely wrong about the "Arab street" being resentful of Washington's commitment to Israel's survival. The smart response, however, is not to force Israel into making suicidal territorial concessions — which would only promote endless upheaval — but to help broker the kind of peace that both Israel and the Palestinians will see as just and lasting. *Jerusalem, January 3.*

SECOND TAKE

MIDDLE EAST TIMES

THE Middle East this new year has to deal with a new US president, a new economic reality, a new Israeli government and a new war. This is not so much US president-elect Barack Obama's "change you can believe in" as change that the long-suffering people of the region have to live with.

The immediate challenge is the new war in Gaza — a war born of extreme frustration on both sides, which is to say of real weakness. The militants in Gaza know there is little they can do against the Israeli state save to goad it. The Israelis know there is no military solution to this. They will never stop all the rockets, and they have no intention of trying to occupy Gaza's ambush-packed warren of over 1-million people.

So Hamas makes unconvincing gestures of attacking Israel and Israel makes unconvincing gestures of retaliation and in reality both sides are waiting for something to turn up that

will change the nature of the game.

That is where the change comes in. But Israel's election, whether it brings back Benjamin Netanyahu as head of a Likud government or Tzipi Livni as the head of some loose coalition, will in itself change little, because Israel has so few options and Israel's politicians are waiting to see what the new US president will mean for them.

There are predictions in the Israeli media that because the new president's middle name is Hussein and his father was a Muslim, the US is about to get tough with Israel.

This is fantasy. For Obama, Israel is a second-order, perhaps even a third-order problem. Obama's priority is and will remain the US economy. His second priority will be Asia and his relations with China, Japan and India, along with the Afghan war and Pakistan. Then comes Iraq and Iran. And since the prospects for a lasting Israeli-Palestinian settlement are so elusive, only a devoted optimist could expect him to put much effort into them. *Cairo, January 2.*

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HELEN SUZMAN/Rhoda Kadalie

The 'bright star' whose just and brave light was never dimmed

IT IS an honour to pay tribute to Helen Suzman, the iconic liberal parliamentarian, who died on January 1. For many of us who knew her intimately, it was not a happy New Year's Day. Her family has lost a dear mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother; her staff have lost a wonderful and caring employer and friend; her bridge partners will feel her loss keenly; her absence will leave a gaping hole in the life of her many friends; and I lost a dear buddy, who rated my columns regularly as either "one of your best" or "not one of your best!"

At 91, Helen was the youngest friend I had. She was modern, au fait with world events, intelligent and extremely funny. A month ago she called to congratulate me on some of my other columns. "How can you read when you have just had cataract surgery?" I asked. "You forget," she responded, "I have two daughters with doctorates who can read!" Last week, she called me excitedly to tell me that she had received a Christmas card from Thabo and Zanele Mbeki. She was especially pleased and felt particularly special when Nelson Mandela and Graca Machel popped in to make their surprise visits.

Her contribution to the struggle for democracy and the consequent demise of apartheid was more significant than many people today realise. A lone voice in a formidable, patriarchal Parliament, she used her extensive political rigour and ready wit to expose the iniquities of apartheid to the world. For this she became world renowned, twice nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize, receiving numerous honorary doctorates, and the DBE from the Queen of England in 1989.

That Helen and I became close friends is rather strange, given that she entered Parliament in 1953, the year I was born. She was to become an ardent fighter against the laws that directly affected my life — the Group Areas Act, the Mixed Marriages Act and the Immorality Act. She abhorred the Population Registration Act of 1950 that determined the status of everyone in SA, where they went to school, where they worked, whom they could marry and sleep with, which public amenities they could use, and where they could or could not own property.

On issues of justice, no prime minister, no minister, no government official escaped her barbs. Those who took her on did so at their peril. She deflected their abuse and insults with a sardonic wit that made headlines the world over. Having served under five formidable prime ministers — DF Malan, JG Strydom, HF Verwoerd, BJ Vorster and PW Botha — from 1953 to 1989, Helen showed tremendous courage in single-handedly taking on the plight of the oppressed. Her battles for a just society were never done sanctimoniously. She gave as good as she got. Often, as the only woman in Parliament, she took on men who probably had the most daunting visages of any politicians in the world. "It is not my questions that are an embarrassment, it is your answers," was one of her world-famous retaliatory comments when a minister blamed her for the world's negative perception of SA.

Helen was a politician of a special type. She was elected as a member of the United Party in 1953, which she left soon afterwards with colleagues to form the Progressive Party, later known as the Progressive Federal

Party. Armed with devastatingly accurate information gleaned from her insistence "on seeing things for herself", she became a "boots-on politician", going where the action was. In 1973, she went to Kliptown to see the unrest for herself; she visited the squatter camps in Cape Town in the winter of 1981, after shelters had been demolished by government officials; she addressed crowds at a mass funeral of victims of police shootings in Alexandra in 1986; took statements from Moutse residents who had been assaulted by vigilantes; visited Oukasi residents threatened by forced removals; and she pleaded the fate of the Sharpeville Six in 1988.

Helen's legacy of tackling issues in an informed manner became the hallmark of liberal opposition politics in SA. Already in 1969, she spoke of apartheid as structural violence that disrupted black lives in a most personal way, commenting that "in its broadest sense, violence can also mean the unfettered use of power by the state against a citizen, so as to deprive him of his normal civil rights. In this sense we have a great deal of violence in SA. Mass removals of African people from their homes is a violence... the thousands upon thousands of Africans in resettlement areas, leading hopeless and helpless lives of poverty and unemployment, is a violence; the very way in which those removals have taken place is a violence — these people were removed without any proper planning having been



In this August 8, 1986 file photo, Winnie Mandela, left, then wife of African National Congress leader Nelson Mandela, who was imprisoned at the time, speaks with then Progressive Federal Party member Helen Suzman in Orlando West, Soweto.

done for housing, health, education, medical services. The destruction of the coloured community ... in District Six is a violence. The uprooting of Indians from cities and dorps ... is a violence. The pass laws are a violence..."

In 1989, she invited me to dinner with a group of illustrious national and international guests. Helen was in full command of the evening,

engaging with great insight with world and national politics, and keeping us spellbound with her wit, charm and wicked sense of humour. Often self-effacing, her

daughter Frances and I could not convince her to update her biography. "I have done what I had to do and have lived a good life. I need no more." Just a month ago, when it was mooted that Houghton Drive be renamed Helen Suzman Drive, she resolutely refused, saying: "I just think that it's an unnecessary expense and I have been given enough recognition."

That is the Helen I knew, involved in politics not for the glory or reward, but for the love of democracy itself and a belief in equality of opportunity for all. And that is why she entered politics in 1948, incensed by the inhumane effects migrant labour and the influx control laws had on the mobility of black people and the destruction of family life. When she made submissions to the Fagan commission in 1947, hoping to influence the Smuts government to reverse a battery of laws that reduced black men, women and their families to mere chattels, she was clearly driven to speak up for the oppressed. It accounted for her indefatigable opposition to the apartheid laws and catapulted her into a role that set her apart from her fellow parliamentarians as the "only bright star in a dark chamber", to quote Albert Luthuli.

She fought those pernicious laws to the end of her career in 1989 with

the ferocity of a tiger, holding up a mirror to a world that might have remained ignorant because of prevailing media censorship. Only she could do so authentically because parliamentary privilege enabled her to go places denied to ordinary citizens.

She was able to raise issues in Parliament that were then disseminated by parliamentary correspondents throughout the world. It is for this reason that Helen constantly lamented the closing down of real debate in Parliament since 1994, citing how the speaker, ironically in the apartheid Parliament, protected her right to speak on any topic.

Her parliamentary privilege also enabled her to monitor prison conditions and visit Mandela on Robben Island, organising a pair of spectacles when she noticed how the quarry affected his eyesight. Among others, she interceded for Bram Fischer, responded to the needs of Terror Lekota, and helped Winnie Mandela in more ways than one. No wonder Breyten Breytenbach said of her: "The prisoners, both political and common-law, consider her as Our Lady of the Prisoners. She is indeed a living myth among the people inhabiting the world of shadows."

It is for this reason that, at any given moment, Helen's house would be filled with the great and the good from all corners of the world. Scores of television and radio crew still sought her opinion until very recently, and came to interview her about some or other political event. Until her death, she ran an impeccable household, and visiting her would be a five-star experience, with breakfast in bed and orders taken the night before. Nothing infuriated her more than being called an icon, and her appeal was due not only to her great political acumen, but also to her ability to make fun of herself, captured in a picture in her memoir of her receiving the DBE from Queen

Elizabeth in 1989, captioned "Great occasion, terrible hat!"

She was born Helen Gavronsky in 1917 and her mother died soon after her birth. Her father then married a woman Helen liked and appreciated, and she grew up in a very loving and privileged home. Having gone to a Catholic convent, she attributed her work ethic to Sister Columba, who instilled in her a rigour that was to guide her throughout her entire life. Helen married Mosie Suzman, an eminent physician of whom she always spoke with great admiration, and had two daughters, Patricia, a doctor in Boston, and Frances, an art historian in the UK.

Not much is widely known of Helen's post-parliamentary career, which in itself was remarkable. When she retired from Parliament aged 72, she not only wrote her memoirs but continued her engagement in a hundred and one activities. As a delegate for her party, she was involved in negotiations at Codesa. She was appointed by Mandela to the first electoral commission of SA. She was chairwoman of the Vaal Reef Disaster Fund for three

years, appointed to look after the widows and children of the 104 men killed in the Vaal Reef mining disaster of May 10 1995. She was president of the South African Institute of Race Relations, one of the premier research institutions in SA.

At any time over the past 13 years since I got to know her, whenever I called Helen she would be on some or other board, working her way through reams and reams of paper, dutifully and diligently scrutinising minutes, or every application for a scholarship as a member of the Ernest Oppenheimer Trust. She was a trustee and patron of the Impumelelo Innovations Award Trust, a human rights commissioner, and, unbeknown to many, a home-based complaints ombudsman, using her parliamentary skills to assist hun-

dreds of people who phoned her for some or other kind of assistance.

This political icon became flesh for me in 1995, when Mandela appointed me to the 11-person Human Rights Commission, on which Helen was a commissioner. At 78, she was still as feisty as she had been all her life. She read all the documentation that needed to be read; she scrutinised the finances closely, ensuring that not a cent was out of order; and when she was called a racist for daring to question unwarranted expenses, she demanded an apology.

Whenever we embarked on field visits to introduce ourselves to organisations, Helen stole the headlines, much to the chagrin of fellow commissioners. Once a black woman wept at the "privilege" of meeting Helen in the flesh, embracing her and thanking the commission for bringing Helen to her community, when in fact we were doing a routine visit to a constituency. Helen continued to visit the prisons, taking up the plight of many prisoners. She wrote letters to the newspapers, gave keynote addresses at many illustrious events, assisted "People's Poet" Mzwakhe Mbuli with his defence and helped him get out of jail. She fought for the title deeds of some Alexandra residents, who had been denied them under a bizarre municipal regulation. A stickler for detail, she verified every fact before responding to anything and never feared being politically incorrect — as when she opposed the use of sanctions — if it meant fighting for justice.

And that is the irony. While many novice black activists today try to discredit Helen for her work, purely on racist grounds, there are many black people, including the likes of Mandela, the Robben Islanders, and none other than Nobel Prize-winner Luthuli, who acknowledged Helen's commitment to justice, democracy and the poor.

I can cite a number of anecdotes that epitomise what Helen was all about. In the 1990s she drove to Soweto to visit a former domestic worker with whom she kept in contact to the end. She got lost, stopped to ask a man for directions, invited the man into her car and, while he directed her, she found out that he had no identity document. The next day, she phoned the then home affairs minister, Mangosuthu Buthezi, leader of the Inkatha Freedom Party, asking him to assist this man in obtaining an ID book. What lone white woman in her seventies drives into Soweto, picks up a stranger after asking him to give her directions, and then organises an ID book for him?

On another occasion, she threatened legal action against a local authority for demolishing unjustly the house of John Carlin's domestic worker in Alexandra, without the promise of suitable alternative accommodation. She managed to secure some form of legal redress for the woman, who would have been homeless had Helen not intervened.

Helen was adored and respected by many. Such adulation is contained in hundreds of letters, some of which were exhibited at the recent Helen Suzman exhibition. Often at the receiving end of snide and anti-Semitic remarks, she dismissed them with great humour, regaling her friends with stories such as the time a member of the Kappie Kommando asked what her ancestors were doing while hers were taking the Bible to the savages on the other side of the mountain. Helen responded: "My ancestors were busy writing the Bible."

That is the Helen I know. A rare species indeed for a politician and an example for many who are now defiling the halls of Parliament, pursuing their own decadent interests. That she never received the Nobel Peace Prize is a historical oversight if ever there was one.

At this time of mourning, our thoughts are with her two daughters, Patricia and Frances, who cared for her deeply and whom she loved enormously; her two grandchildren, Daniel and Josie, whom she adored; and a recent great-grandson, Leo.

To her employees, she was more than an employer, and she had a special bond with Betty, her housekeeper. This tribute is incomplete without mention of Benjie, her beloved Labrador, and the two doted-upon shih-tzus, who had a prime spot on her bed.

Fare thee well, O Noble Helen. We shall miss you — a mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, a friend, a confidante, politician exemplar, and one of SA's most illustrious patriots! We celebrate an exceptional woman whose life is superbly captured in a letter written to her by Mandela on the occasion of her 85th birthday. He wrote: "Your courage, integrity and principled commitment to justice have marked you as one of the outstanding figures in the history of public life in SA.... How fortunate our country feels for having had you as part of its public life and politics."

■ *Kadalie is a human rights activist based in Cape Town.*