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promoting liberal constitutional democracy



The Helen Suzman Memorial Lecture

2009





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Vision

To be a leader in public service research.

Mission

To defend the values that underpin our liberal constitutional democracy and to promote respect for human rights. The work of the Foundation will be driven by the principles that informed Helen Suzman's public life, and to this end a research profile will be developed that will focus on public service in all its constituent parts.

In its work, the Foundation will be guided by

- informed and reasoned discourse;
- fairness and equity;
- the protection of human rights.

The Foundation is not aligned to any political party and will actively work with a range of people and organisations to have a constructive influence on the country's emerging democracy.

Hosted in association with our partners
the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at UCT,
the Friedrich Naumann Foundation and
Iziko Museums of Cape Town

On the Cover:

This is a copy of a work belonging to the Parliament of South Africa

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Francis Antonie

Director



Francis Antonie

It is with great pleasure that the Helen Suzman Foundation, in association with its partners, the Kaplan Centre for Jewish Studies and Research at UCT, the Friedrich Naumann Foundation and Iziko Museums of Cape Town, presents you with this copy of Dr Mamphela Ramphele's Lecture.

This is the second lecture in honour of Helen Suzman. These Lectures seek to honour not only Helen's extraordinary contribution to public life as a very public figure in Parliament, but they also seek to uphold the values which she brought to public life in and out of Parliament. These values embody amongst others, informed and reasoned discourse, fairness and equity and above all the protection of individual human rights.

Helen's dedication to public service was a defining feature of her great Parliamentary career and it is only fitting that this memorial lecture by Mamphela Ramphele has as its theme, Integrity in Public Life.

Mamphela Ramphele is a woman who has already left her mark on public life in South Africa. She has a distinguished academic record and is a former Vice Chancellor of the University of Cape Town, becoming the first black woman to hold this position at a South African university. Mamphela served as a managing director of the World Bank from 2000 to 2004. She is a director of major private companies but her involvement in public life continues, and most recently she was the chair of convenors of the Dinokeng Scenarios.





Integrity in Public Life

Mamphela Ramphela



Dr Mamphela Ramphela

How do we wrestle with the inherent tensions in choosing integrity in public life as individuals, public servants, business people and community activists?

We are here to honour Helen Suzman's memory whose life was the embodiment of integrity in all respects. Hers was a tough time in the life of our nation. But she did not shy away from making those tough calls that leaders who leave a deep imprint on society are called to make.

For Nelson Mandela, her contemporary, it was a matter of commitment to ideals of freedom for which he was prepared to die. For a much younger man, Stephen Biko, it was a matter of honouring an idea worth dying for rather than live for ideas that would die. Helen Suzman's ideals drove her from her comfort zone as an upper middle class suburban white South African to stand for a more just society.

All signs in our society point to the need for us to take stock and ask ourselves fundamental questions about how we have been able to discharge our responsibilities to honour the ideals we enshrined in our founding constitution. We stand at a crossroads yet again as a society struggling to emerge from the growing pains of being a young democracy.

It is fair to say that much more is asked of us than we have given over the last decade and a half. We all grossly underestimated the task of transforming ourselves into a democratic society. We did not reflect enough on the paradigm shift it would entail given our pre-1994 histories. Nor did we appreciate the complexities embedded in our diverse starting points in our journey to the new dispensation. The TRC process was a bridge that allowed us to cross over the turbulent waters of our past. But much more work remains to deal with the unfinished business of growing into the nation we dared to dream to become.

The women of Crossroads are yet to wipe away their tears. The social pain of past and ongoing humiliation at the hands of public servants undermines whatever self-respect many of them have clung to over the last 15 years. The extortions they endure from unscrupulous moneylenders as they try to keep body and soul together leave them in a state of permanent anxiety.

The issue we face now is how we rediscover the ideals for which so many have sacrificed their lives and devoted so much energy? How do we wrestle with the inherent tensions in choosing integrity in public life as individuals, public servants, business people and community activists? How do we follow Helen's example and stand out above the fray and pressures from peers to lead lives characterised by integrity?



What is Integrity in Public Life?

Integrity is defined as that which is beyond reproach, fully honourable and trustworthy. But in public life such a definition is inadequate. The complex issues inherent in integrity are best dealt with by standing outside the obvious formulations.

Theodore Sturgeon takes an interesting approach to this issue in a 1953 novel entitled *The Wages of Synergy*. He constructs a dialogue between a wise man and a youngster:

“An act can be both moral and ethical. But under some circumstances a moral act can be counter to ethics, and an ethical act can be immoral.”

“I am with you so far,” he (the youngster) said.

“Morals and ethics are survival urges, both of them. But look: an individual must survive within his group, the problems of survival within the group are morals.”

“Gotcha.” And ethics?” (The youngster probes further).

“Well the group itself must survive, as a unit. The patterns of an individual within the group, toward the end of group survival, are ethics.”

Cautiously he (the youngster) said, “You’d better go on a bit.”

“You’ll see it in a minute. Now, morals can dictate a pattern to a man such that he survives within the group, but the group itself may have no survival value. For example, in some societies it is immoral not to eat human flesh. But to refrain from it would be ethical, because that would be toward group survival. See.”

Helen Suzman’s life stands as an example of one who wrestled with matters of ethics and morality in a complex political context. She did not shy away from breaking with family expectations of moral choices for a young Jewish woman. Nor did she refrain from making ethical choices that demonstrated courage to follow patterns in her life that went against conventions of “her group.” She was able to see the folly of

what was regarded as “good morals for the survival of the group” to borrow Sturgeon’s formulation.

South Africans tend to have short memories about recent social history. Remember the “Immorality Act”? Here was an example of what was seen as “moral for the survival of the group” namely prohibition of intermarriage between white and black people in order to protect white supremacy. Only the most courageous were able to make the ethical choice of crossing the colour line to follow their hearts. For the majority of South Africans private choice of partner was sacrificed on the altar of “moral expectations of the group.” Some were even prepared to lead unethical double lives of lies and deceit in the name of morality apartheid style.

But awful as the Immorality Act was, it was not the most damaging racist law. The worst damage was

...AL STEP TO CAMOUFLAGED DICTATORSHIP
S. Suzman: This is the Intimidation Bill
World wants AT Bantustan experiment is doomed to failure
totalitarian, says Suzman



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wrought by the migrant labour system and its corollary, the Influx Control Act that systematically destroyed the foundations of indigenous African family life. Africans were reduced to units of labour as a “moral act for the survival of the group” that stood to benefit from their economic exploitation.

Helen Suzman’s courage was most memorable in fighting a lone battle against this inequity. She was not intimidated as a lone voice: only woman, only opposition MP, only defender of human rights of those without a voice. Hers was an ethical stand in the face of overwhelming belief by white people that these were essential laws for their survival as a group in a country with a predominantly black population.

There was little reflection on the absurdity of the belief that “group survival” of a small white segment of the population on a continent where such attempts fail could be sustained by such “moral patterns of behaviour.” Few white people questioned the survival value proposition that was the dominant paradigm of the time. Most were seduced by the “swartgevaar” rhetoric.

Of all the witty statements Helen Suzman made in Parliament the one that is most apt for the subject of this Memorial Lecture is: “I have been sitting here and watching a shiver traversing the green benches in search of a spine to crawl up on!” She had to watch for a long time indeed. Ethical behaviour was soundly trumped by the morality of “group think.”

The question before us now is what frame of reference have we been, and are we currently using to make choices as citizens of this democracy. What paradigm underpins our conduct in public life? Is it group morality or is it ethics? How do we respond to pressure to sustain the patterns of acts driven by group morality? How is this group moral pattern of acts in line with the values of our human rights constitution?

Integrity, Ideals and Citizenship

Our society is bleeding. The social pain endured by those who have remained marginal in our society has burst into greater and louder protests in our streets. Human beings are “hardwired to connect” which in our lexicon we have translated into Ubuntu. Growing research evidence points to the fact that people’s need for connectedness is just as essential as air, food, and water. Exclusion from one’s society thus has a devastating impact on one. In addition scientists believe that the reason why the physical pain and social pain mechanisms are super imposed in bio-physical processes in the brain and possibly other yet unknown body mechanisms related to adaptation and evolution.

We have not focused enough on the costs of exclusion and marginalisation for those people still living in poverty and deprivation. In addition, what development efforts have been made have been driven by a paradigm that does not address the self-worth and self-respect side of social pain of living in an unequal society. RDP houses that are shoddily constructed by politically connected winners of tenders are an additional affront to what is left of their dignity. Disrespect by public officials and loss of life due to uncaring health professionals weigh heavily on those excluded from the fruits of freedom. It is accepted world wide that too great a degree of inequality makes human community impossible. Our democracy is at risk from the level of inequality that is exacerbated by patterns of actions that are unethical.

The media is overflowing with reports of corruption, nepotism and looting of public resources. A culture of impunity has taken root over the last decade due to the failure of those in authority to hold officials involved in these behaviours accountable. The deployment policy of the ANC that has packed public services with incompetent politically connected people has undermined the institutional culture of our public service. The good officials are demoralised, and may have left or are leaving the service. Appointing and promoting people beyond their levels of competence not only breaks the law in terms of the Public Service Act, but fails the ethics test. The public good is undermined by imperatives of the “morality of the Party and its survival.” It is encouraging that some leaders of the ANC are urging a shift from this perverse incentive system.

The same “group morality” operates in the private sector. How else can one explain the participation of the private sector in corrupt and nepotistic deals? What of anti-competitive practices that artificially push up prices for basic foods and

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services that negatively affect poor people disproportionately?

What Legacy?

What are we to tell our grand children and their children about the choices we have made over the last decade and a half of our democracy? Are we going to be able to look with confidence to handing over to the next generation a society we are proud of?

What would we say about our silences in the face of “group morals” trumping ethics in public policy and practice? HIV/AIDS denialism; education under-performance; and corruption in high places? What about our inaction in the face of outrageous statements by young political leaders? Shoot to kill University of Free State Professor Jonathan Jansen! Professor Kader Asmal must just die!

We are at a crossroads as a society. We need to make a second transition

