

Looking to the legacy

Helen Suzman's life reminds us that we have a right to aspire to the highest standards in public life

This feisty, petite lady used to be tickled pink when I greeted her, as I always did: "Hello, my dear child." She thought it incongruous that someone nearly two decades younger could be so crazy.

Dear Helen, what a great privilege it is to be here to honour you, one of the greatest daughters of our soil. It was so heart-warming to read and hear the heartfelt tributes from across the entire political, racial spectrum of our land.

The tributes that poured out to mark her passing made one's heart swell with pride. But her passing should be marked as a national bereavement, when our flags hung at half mast. She was quite extraordinary, as we have heard so eloquently described. Really, this diminutive person stood up to the crude, uncouth taunts and jeers of the Nationalists in Parliament for all those many, many years, quite stoksielalleen.

They poured their withering scorn on one they must have thought to be the epitome of a misguided white do-gooder; a liberal, sies! A kaffir sissie, someone needing

to be redeemed from herself. It must have been a daunting, intimidating ordeal, not something one looked forward to with too much enthusiasm.

So we really have to give great thanks for her. She deserves all the accolades and acclaim that came her way for her quite remarkable determination and courage. Once she had decided that the policies of the Nats were pernicious, wrong and unprincipled, then she threw herself into the fray of opposing and exposing their viciousness and irrationality with a fearless and intrepid zeal, and for so long without the solace and backing of parliamentary colleagues, she turned out to be the only real opposition to the ghastliness of apartheid.

Maybe we haven't shown just how deeply grateful we are and how much we owe to her. You might have wondered whether she wasn't perhaps something of a masochist. Surely there were far easier ways of making a living. Well, she had been convicted on principle by her personal integrity and once she decided that apartheid was wrong, it had to be opposed by every fibre of her tiny frame.



Let me close in paying my warmest tribute to a wonderful human being. I seek to underscore just one or two salient points that come from what is going to be the legacy of Helen Suzman. One is that it is good for us to remember that our freedom has been won through the endeavours of many, many stalwarts of all races. If we are the so-called rainbow nation with diverse elements, that nation owes its existence to efforts of a remarkably diverse group of human beings of all sizes, shapes, races, political persuasions and all religious affiliations, or none.

No one group can claim a hegemony merely by virtue of its ethnicity. South Africa belongs to all of us, to all who dwell here. All, all of us are sons and daughters of this land. You can be a zealous proponent of a particular viewpoint and yet you can all the while be civil, courteous. Our public discourse should not sink to the level of the gutter. Debate can be vigorous, yes, animated, yes. But in the end, it has to be the cogency of the argument and not the loudness and barbarity of language that should win the day.

I always remember that my father used to say: "Don't raise your voice, improve your argument." We must have zero tolerance for corruption, for those who have a proclivity to have their hands in the till. We want those holding public office, our representatives, to be principled persons, persons whom we can be proud to look up to; not embarrassments that need to be defended.

Dear friends, we inhabit a moral universe, right and wrong are things that matter fundamentally. Those who become arrogant, who become drunk with power; who seemingly are unassailable, watch out. The Nats were returned election after election, with increased majorities. Waar is hulle nou? Those who hold power and are afflicted by the arrogance of power must know that they are ultimately going to get their come-uppance. For ultimately, power is for service.

Dear friends, we have an incredible array of gifted people in this land. Don't let's sideline people because of their ethnicity or their political affiliation. Our land is a scintillating success waiting to happen.