



Patrick Laurence

1937-2011

Defending liberalism in a tribute to Peter Brown, the former Chairman of the Liberal Party, in *Focus 35*, Patrick Laurence observed that it was the duty of liberals to monitor the activities and ideological inclinations of ruling parties. His own long career in journalism was spent doing just that – scrutinising and analysing the behaviour of the old apartheid government with as much diligence and dispassion as he did the performance of the ANC-led alliance, post 1994.

Laurence was a rarity among journalists – a reporter and commentator who valued factual accuracy and balance above all else – even if that often meant tempering the forceful expression of his own views. He began working as a history teacher – at Jeppe Boys High and St Stithians – but his studies for an MA in African politics at the universities of Wits and Natal led to a career switch to journalism. He joined *The Star* and worked for a brief spell in its London office before moving to the political desk of the *Rand Daily Mail*, where an interview he did with PAC leader Robert Sobukwe in 1973 and posted overseas for publication led to his arrest at the hands of the security police for quoting a banned person, and a suspended sentence of 18 months.

After the closure of the *Mail* in 1985, he returned to *The Star*, for which he worked for a decade before moving unsuccessfully to New Zealand, where he found the environment to be wholly unstimulating by comparison with South Africa's. Returning home after a few months, he worked for the *Financial Mail* as a political writer before his retirement from full-time journalism.

For most of his career, Laurence also worked as a correspondent for foreign publications, including the *Guardian*, the *Irish Times*, the *Observer* and the *Economist*. In 2002 he responded to an invitation from the director of the Helen Suzman Foundation, Professor Lawrie Schlemmer, to edit this quarterly journal, which he did most diligently until Raenette Taljaard assumed the editorship upon becoming director of the HSF in 2006. Until shortly before his death, he also provided political commentary and analysis for Raymond Louw's weekly briefing paper, *Southern African Report*.

'Laurence of Azania', as he was dubbed by a graffiti writer after his second and more celebrated brush with the law, was a man who upheld that most sacred of journalistic principles – the protection of a confidential source. In March 1991, he reported the disappearance of a key witness in the trial of Winnie Mandela on a charge of kidnapping. The police invoked Section 205 of the Criminal Procedure Act and brought him before a magistrate in an attempt to force him to reveal his source.

When he refused to do so, he was sentenced by the court to ten days in prison, such period to be extended indefinitely until he co-operated with the prosecutors. After being taken off to a cell in Diepkloof Prison, Laurence was released on bail at midnight on the same day, after an urgent action was brought by *The Star's* lawyers, who eventually succeeded in having his conviction and sentence set aside by the Supreme Court. He said afterwards that the most gratifying aspect of the case was the unstinting support he received from his fellow journalists.

Laurence was also the author of several books on South African politics, of which his summary of the SproCas report on South Africa's political alternatives, co written with Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, was perhaps the most influential. At Nelson Mandela's first media conference after his release from prison, he singled out Laurence as a political writer whom he had read with appreciation for many years. The former editor of *Focus* was also highly regarded by Helen Suzman, whom he counted among his friends.

Besides his scholarly pursuits, Laurence was an athlete of note in his younger days, winning his Springbok colours as a miler. He was also a good cricketer and tennis player and ran the Comrades Marathon several times. Until his death he exercised regularly, becoming a familiar sight to motorists as he strode along the roads around his Parktown, Johannesburg home.

Gentlemanly in manner, with the abstracted air of an academic, Patrick Laurence was unfailingly courteous in his dealings with people. He was well respected within the journalistic and political fraternities, where his fair-mindedness was highly regarded. He is survived by his wife Sandra and daughters Sarah and Emma, to whom the Helen Suzman Foundation extends sincere condolences.

Richard Steyn

The family has established a scholarship in memory of Patrick Laurence. The scholarship will be used to help journalists further their studies at the University of Witwatersrand.

The banking details are given below for those wishing to make a donation

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