

Alex Boraine Biography

Abstract

Alex Boraine was a Member of Parliament during the time of apartheid who desired a change to equal rights for all South Africans. Boraine believed in equality and is today known globally as a face of transitional justice. Co-founding two non-governmental organizations: Institute for Democracy in South Africa and the International Center for Transitional Justice, Boraine has played an active role in helping his own country and other countries transition from a time of oppression to a democracy.

Key words

Alex Boraine, IDASA, ICTJ, transitional justice, apartheid, parliament, progressive federal party, non-governmental organizations, Methodist church, truth reconciliation commission

Introduction

Alex Boraine is globally known as the face of transitional justice and as one of the main architects of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Transitional Justice refers to the judicial and non-judicial measures that have been implemented by different countries in order to redress the legacies of massive human rights abuses (*ICTJ*, 2002). Deeply embedded in his faith, Boraine pursued ending the oppression of apartheid and continues to deliver the Christian message to the people of South Africa. Boraine holds strong desires for his country to heal and forgive the pains and aches of South Africa's apartheid. With this strong desire for human rights he became a global adviser on the measures that need to be taken for a country to begin the

healing (transitional) process. Today, Alex Boraine is seen as an expert of the struggles that other countries may face in time of transition and represents the face of transition in hard times.

Alex Boraine was born in 1931 in a neighborhood of Cape Town called Brooklyn (Boraine, 2008). While not a slum, it was very poor for a white neighborhood. He is the son of Mike and Isa Boraine. Alex's father was a handyman and his mother a homemaker. He is the youngest of three children and has two brothers: Ronnie and Aubrey. In his childhood, Alex did not have regular interaction with religion despite Alex's mother being a very devoted churchgoer. During his childhood, times were hard for the Boraine family, especially after his father was laid off and had trouble finding work. The Boraine family got by on the bare minimum. During Boraine's childhood, World War II began and South Africa agreed to aid Great Britain in the fight against Germany. Boraine states that this was truly the only strife in his childhood (Boraine, 15). His brothers enlisted and died in the war.

After reaching Standard 6 and receiving his junior certificate, Alex decided to leave school and find a job. Even though the war was over, he was sure that he too would die in combat (Boraine, 2008). Alex found a job in the classifieds section of a newspaper at an electric company earning low wages. Leaving school for a job was a terrible decision for Alex. He began associating with irresponsible people. Alex began drinking and was slowly brought down by his new group of friends. Luckily his mother was witnessing this spiral and convinced Alex to go to church with her. Alex went and was astonished by all the pretty girls that attended church. That same day he signed up for a co-ed Christian immersion camp. While Alex only signed up in hopes he would meet one of the pretty girls there, he found Jesus instead (Boraine, 2008).

This camp marked the beginning of Alex's religious life. He began to learn about the Bible, the teachings of Jesus, and the ways of God. Alex was making God the center of his life.

His immersion in Christianity led him to enter the ministry in the Methodist church. He traveled throughout South Africa's countryside to preach and, in doing so, learned how people lived outside of his family, neighborhood, and city. Iniquitous race relations troubled him.

In 1953, Alex went to Rhodes University to obtain a BA in theology and biblical studies. While at Rhodes, he met his future wife Jenny. He graduated from Rhodes and began acting as the university chaplain and working in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Upon graduation his teacher, Professor Hewson, had collected generous funds from an anonymous group of Methodist benefactors so that Alex could attend Oxford University to continue his studies. Just as Boraine and his wife and daughter were about to leave for Oxford in 1960, the Sharpeville Massacre occurred. Alex was torn between staying in South Africa to help his country and continuing his education. Ultimately, Professor Hewson convinced him to continue his studies because Professor Hewson believed that the fight against apartheid would be an ongoing struggle and that additional education would equip Alex to do more good in the long term.

Boraine describes his time at Oxford as a huge awakening. He felt ashamed of the apartheid policies and questioned, "How could I be so arrogant and not see that everyone is a child of God and deserves to be treated equally." (Boraine, 2008). In his final days at Oxford, he attended a lecture by Frans Hildebrand, who convinced him to join him in America at Drew University. At Drew University, Boraine obtained a doctorate in Religious Studies and was encouraged by faculty and the student body to become an advocate for South Africa. He met Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy and advocated on behalf of his country. After his dissertation, Alex moved back to South Africa and once again became involved in the Methodist church.

Alex made a name for himself going beyond spreading the word of God and publicizing his anti-apartheid ideals. He became a leader in the Methodist church and revised the youth Sunday group teachings used throughout South Africa. He then started up an organization through the Methodist church similar to the America Corps, where youth leaders were placed throughout South Africa. Later, in 1970, Boraine became the youngest elected President of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa. He held this position for three years (Boraine, 2008). Boraine felt that he was under extreme surveillance and pressure to make changes not only in the church but to spread his political views on apartheid.

While acting as President, Boraine was able to meet with De Beers and the Oppenheimer families to discuss how poorly they treated the African and migrant workers. He did not hold his tongue and expressed his disgust with the company's administration for allowing such treatment. Because of his strong opinions, the Oppenheimer family offered him a job in the Anglo American division so that he could make the necessary changes for better treatment of workers. This experience with Anglo American led Boraine to see first hand the harsh conditions under which workers lived. In 1973, Boraine was sent a letter from Siphso Buthelezi, the Secretary General of [Black Peoples Convention](#), to meet (Buthelezi, 1973). This letter showed that black South Africans were seeing the work that Boraine was doing, and trusted him enough to seek help financially, based on the work he was doing in Anglo American. Boraine valued the work he was doing and enjoyed making changes to better workers' lives.

In 1974, Boraine made his debut in politics. He ran for a seat in parliament. Backed by his church and many others, Boraine ran as a candidate for the [Progressive Party](#).



Figure 1: Source: SAHA

Many people still had doubts as to whether or not he stood a chance in politics. Boraine spoke his opinions openly, advocating for the end of apartheid and for a nation based on equality (Boraine, 2008). That same year, Boraine won his seat in Parliament and quickly became a strong member of parliament. He promoted the same ideals even if they were unpopular or confrontational. He became known as “the turbulent Priest.” (Boraine, 2008.)

Boraine was a strong supporter of those Black individuals taking non-violent stands against oppression. For example, he was a strong supporter of Steve Biko and was one of the few white people that attended his funeral after he died in 1977. Although Boraine was subject to much pressure for supporting Steve Biko and the Black Consciousness movement (Boraine, 2008), nothing was going to deter Boraine from doing what was right. He was constantly publishing statements in magazines advocating for change and believed that change was necessary if South Africa wanted to succeed as a country.

Boraine’s time in Parliament was not easy. He held strong views on matters that were not popular. Furthermore, his family felt the pressure of the stances he was taking (Boraine, 2008). Boraine’s family received daily death threats and disturbing phone calls. At one point, Boraine’s son Andrew was detained for his activism against apartheid. The court kept him for many months and many times Boraine did not know where he was being kept. Finally, just as Boraine was about to make an outrageous cry against Parliament to release his son, the court released Andrew.

This caused him to resign his seat in Parliament in 1986, after 12 years of service (Boraine, 2010). Boraine admitted in an interview that, “when I left parliament in 1986 it freed me to take a much more open stance. That is also why I left. I felt that the constrictions of the official party system made it very difficult to take a really tough stand. I also thought that it was necessary for some whites who had the status, the protection and the opportunity to sacrifice that, break away and be with those who were saying the same things, but who were very strongly punished and sometimes tortured, jailed, driven out or underground” (Sellström, 2010). Boraine had decided that it was time to try a new and different method, perhaps a pull to negotiations politics.

In 1986, with [Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert](#), Boraine began the necessary traveling and networking needed to start up Institute for Democracy in South Africa (Sellström 2010). Boraine visited with Norwegian consul Bjarne Lindstrøm who gave him his starting funds and set him on his journey to meet with all the black South Africans that he could. After this was accomplished, Boraine reported back to Lindstrøm and said his next source of support would be from the Nordic Countries (Sellström, 2010). Boraine and Slabbert visited six countries in four days to convince their governments to support IDASA (Sellström, 2010). Their travels and networking resulted in support from Denmark, Sweden, Norway, and Finland. These funds allowed for the meeting of the [African National Congress](#) exiles in Dakar, Senegal in 1987 (Sellström, 2010). This was the big push that IDASA needed to show that it was making strong strides to help the movement and that it was in no way compromised by the South African government.

After the meeting in Dakar, IDASA was able to hold multiple meetings with the ANC, including some that were not just for top leaders, but also for women, artists, and poets (Sellström, 2010). IDASA is also recognized today for proposing transitional justice and reconciliation for the

victims and perpetrators of human rights violations during apartheid, consequently playing an important role in the formation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Boraine, 2000). According to President F.W. de Klerk's Chief of Staff, Boraine's organization of IDASA and the actions of the organization gave de Klerk enough courage to make his famous speech in 1990 (Sellström, 2010). IDASA's work was being recognized by some of the most influential leaders worldwide, such as Nelson Mandela (Farouk, 2004).

From 1986 to 1995, Boraine's career was mainly concerned with ending apartheid and addressing the legacy it left behind. This was made possible through IDASA. IDASA is famously known for convening the ANC meeting in Dakar, but also for advocating for transitional justice and reconciliation for the victims and perpetrators of human rights during apartheid. This resulted in IDASA supervising the testimonies given by the victims and perpetrators (Farouk, 2004). In 1995 President Nelson Mandela appointed Boraine to the position of Deputy Chair serving under Chairman Archbishop Desmond Tutu (Boraine, 2008). The Truth and Reconciliation Process was South Africa's attempt to come to grips with its apartheid history and facilitate reconciliation to propel the country forward as a whole. Many believe that this process helped to reduce the tension from starting a full on war outbreak in South Africa (Gibson, 2004). The transitional justice within the TRC helped to transition South Africa from an oppressed government to a stable democracy (Gibson, 2004). Boraine served on the TRC from 1996 to 1998. The TRC was recognized as a "third way" in dealing with a legacy of human rights abuse and an attempt to institutionalize justice (Van Zyl, 2009).

Boraine's experience with the Truth Reconciliation Commission and co-founding IDASA gave him the experience to become a leading expert on the transitional process. Boraine's repertoire led him to New York City where he served as a law professor at New York University

in 1998 (*ICTJ*, 2002). As a staff member at NYU, he served as a professor and co-founded and directed one of NYU's newer programs: New York University Law School's Justice in Transition program (Boraine, 2008).

Following his time at NYU, Boraine founded his next non-profit organization: International Center of Transitional Justice. The ICTJ is dedicated to pursuing accountability in mass atrocity and human rights through transitional justice (*ICTJ*, 2002). The ICTJ is based in New York City where Boraine started it. Its mission statement highlights its characteristics of helping “countries pursuing accountability for mass atrocity or human rights,” “governments seeking to promote peace and reconciliation,” and that the organization is “committed to strengthening the emerging field of transitional justice” (*ICTJ*, 2002). The ICTJ was funded and developed on the five-year proposal developed by Alex Boraine, Priscilla Hayner, and Paul van Zyl (*ICTJ*, 2002). This proposal received funding support from the Ford Foundation, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and the Andrus Family Fund (*ICTJ*, 2002).

Alex Boraine was the first President of the ICTJ (Boraine, 2008)(*ICTJ*, 2002). The ICTJ received immediate demands from multiple countries asking for assistance. The ICTJ has helped all of those who have asked for help. In 2004, Alex Boraine returned to South Africa to establish the ICTJ Center in Cape Town (Coughlan, 2011). Since the founding of the ICTJ, they have established offices in Brussels, Geneva, Beirut, Bogota, Jakarta, Kampala, Monrovia, Nairobi, and Nepal (Coughlan, 2011). He served as an acting president of the ICTJ for three years. He remains the chairperson of the ICTJ for South Africa (Coughlan, 2011). Acting as president of the ICTJ, Boraine was invited to visit many countries by non-governmental organizations or

governments to aide in their transitions. These countries are usually ones transitioning from dictatorships to democracy (Coughlan, 2011).

Boraine viewed himself as an important figure during the transition from apartheid, especially with his work with IDASA and the Truth Reconciliation Commission. Boraine was able to pursue his mission with the ministry and extend this to a bigger cause of national reconciliation. Today, Alex Boraine sits on the Advisory Board of the ICTJ. He is a Global Visiting Professor to NYU. He continues to visit other countries providing aid and visits many conventions as an expert in Transitional Justice.

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