

Alex Boraine, a prince of peace

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**A major legacy of Alex Boraine's life is the pushback it provides in effectively repelling a view too fashionable in some circles. It is about the white liberals' role leading up to our democracy.**

Alex Boraine, a leader among liberals and assorted social democrats, contributed massively to honourable and effective dissent, and activism within the law against racist tyranny.

He and his lifelong colleague Van Zyl Slabbert, in the same political tradition of people like Helen Suzman, Alan Paton, Colin Eglin, Leo Marquard, Margaret Ballinger and Peter Brown, to name but a few, fought for years in the political wilderness against an evil, racist system. As a newspaper editor, I watched this closely. Each worked for social justice in different ways. But a binding factor was that they put worldly reward and personal convenience second in life, and genuinely sought to bring apartheid down – through peaceful means. They held out their hands to those of different colour and persuasion and invited them to walk with them.

Alex Boraine was a prince of the peace.

These days, it is fashionable, especially among younger people not always au fait with our diverse history, to airbrush the contribution of an important, though small, body of whites to securing the unexpected democracy we still have, warts and all.

The understandable black bitterness and frustration, eg of knowing about parents, grandparents and ancestors cruelly dispossessed of livelihood and land (both of which must now be remedied urgently), and bludgeoned into seemingly perpetual serfdom by apartheid, can lead to youngsters becoming even angrier than their downtrodden forebears. That seems to be a powerful generational force running through history since time immemorial. The current plight, endured in a country of few jobs and opportunities, exacerbates such feelings.

I can't blame them for having such emotions, which unfortunately lead to outbursts of unbridled anger and sometimes unruly behaviour. But they should aim at the right targets. They should look at the history of dissent more closely – and at least grudgingly accord some authenticity to the case that not all whites agreed with the apartheid system, and in fact did something about this – often at the cost to their security, reputations, pockets, freedom and available friends.

Some, in what was once a white Parliament, like those who broke away from the reactionary United Party "official opposition" in 1959, were prepared to throw off former

caution and end up supporting a totally colour-blind new South Africa, under Colin Eglin's Progressive leadership, and with Boraine becoming a leading figure.

This new normal we cherish, one-person-one-vote, has been an entrenched reality for nearly a quarter of a century now, and who now would seriously oppose it? This despite the fact that there is enormous socio-economic and political work ahead to let it produce really durable outcomes, notably the elusive, promised a better life.

Over many years, the liberals became used to suffering their default mode of defeat at the hands of a racist white ruling party. They were slowly vindicated, not only when they managed to increase their numbers and representation, but when it came to South Africa enacting one of the world's finest Constitutions. It – with good jurists interpreting it – guides us into a newly threatened future following the wreckage wrought by the Zuma decade. That's Ramaphosa priority business, and he can be wished well in that.

The Constitution, in its Preamble, speaks of laying the foundations for an “open society”, which concept lies at the base of liberal tenets. It is set in stone for us to strive for. That hopefully permanent Constitution, embraced by virtually all significant groups in 1996, and amended only sparingly, stands today between us and those who would downplay or trash it, even denigrating our national icons like Nelson Mandela in the process. Not to mention their hostility towards white liberals – with abused journalists, society's messengers of good or bad news, disgracefully thrown in almost as an afterthought.

Were it not for the groundwork done by Van Zyl Slabbert and Alex Boraine, first in a white Parliament in which they understandably lost faith, and then through the remarkable Idasa organisation they founded, our democracy may well not have arrived. The top-secret breakthrough, or “endgame”, conducted between ANC leaders and Willie Esterhuyse and Niel Barnard abroad may not have happened but for Idasa's well-known efforts, and those of other active midwives for change.

This is in no way to downplay the decisive role of primarily the ANC liberation movement in organising and fighting locally and abroad to get us to democracy. Nor the determined efforts of the left including the long-banned Communist Party, trade unions, verligte Afrikaners, the churches, media, academe, and so many good forces in a bad society. Not to mention ordinary South Africans opposing the system through countless NGOs, educational and other institutions and in many other fields. Even conservative white big business itself moved, belatedly, to help build the bridges to freedom. Let's recognise them all, rather than denigrate some unjustly.

It was, indeed, a joint effort crowned by a negotiated settlement, rightly led by the main struggle body, the ANC – the historic movement of icons of freedom such as Tambo, Sisulu and Mandela; and Luthuli and others before them. Now the ANC itself faces fissure and

challenge, which is what happens to a movement that becomes a political party. Let that find its way.

Many excellent reviews of Boraine's long life of struggle for freedom have already been written, as his family and friends prepare for his funeral. Concerning those obits I have read in praise of the remarkable Alex Boraine, all I can say is AMEN, with maybe one quibble – the TRC was not Boraine's but originally Kader Asmal's idea, mooted in his inaugural lecture at UWC in 1992 as professor of human rights law. Boraine then ran doggedly with it, in concert with Justice Minister Dullah Omar backed crucially by President Nelson Mandela.

Alex Boraine deserves the nation's eternal thanks and praise, inter alia, for being the TRC's main developer and driving force, serving as deputy TRC chair to that national treasure of ours, Desmond Tutu.



Alex and wife Jenny Boraine. Photo Courtesy Andrew Boraine

But more: Alex's loving wife Jenny and family, who supported him throughout, can feel immensely proud of him as his passing is marked in a service in Constantia on Thursday. It is time for reflection about a truly good and decent man.

*Tony Heard was Editor of the Cape Times, 1971-87. He was a friend and confidante of Borraine's for many decades.*

**Reference:**

Heard, T. (2018). [Alex Borraine, a prince of peace](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-12-10-alex-borraine-a-prince-of-peace/?utm_source=homepagify), from *Daily Maverick*, 10 December 2018, online. Available at [https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-12-10-alex-borraine-a-prince-of-peace/?utm\\_source=homepagify](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2018-12-10-alex-borraine-a-prince-of-peace/?utm_source=homepagify) online. Accessed on 12 December 2018