

A tribute to Sheena Duncan by Alison Tilley, Open Democracy Advice Centre

I have been trying to put my finger on what Sheena taught me. The story that springs to mind is from when we were in the middle of the child support grant campaign in about 1998, and the Black Sash had taken a strong position in favour of the grant being increased, and the means test being widened.

We were invited to a meeting with the then Minister of Social Development, although ~~summoned~~ was perhaps a better description. Sheena displayed no anxiety at all, and I flew up for the meeting, and stayed with her the night before. We talked late into the night about all the things we were interested in - the advice office cases, the advocacy issues the Sash was working on, politics, and economic policy. I don't recall supper, but she and Neil were good cooks, and I do remember once being served a geranium leaf flavoured mousse that Neil had made, telling me he had gathered the leaves when he went for a walk in the neighbourhood. I never worried about food, drink, or having something to read at Sheena's place. The shelves lined with books always yielded up something, if I had forgotten to bring a book.

Sheena had on this occasion hurt her foot, and was using crutches, and also as a result could not wear shoes. So in we went, her with no shoes, supremely indifferent to this problem, and with a small delegation went to meet the Minister. We discussed the social security issues, and then ended up, talking about the quite vigorous advocacy campaign the Sash had conducted. The meeting was very cordial, but came to the point where the Minister, looked Sheena in the eye, and asked her, "But, Mrs Duncan, are you with us or against us?" Sheena shifted slightly on her seat, and responded, "We will be with you when you are right, and we will be against you when you are wrong."

I think of that often when I am talking to officials or politicians, for whom I guess it is confusing, to be supported one day, and subject to criticism the next. But there it is - I am with you when you are right, and I am against you when you are wrong. No confusion, no sense of strategic maneuvering on the issues . a question of principle, and nothing more.

She never took unthought through positions She had always done her reading. I think of myself as a quick reader, but she was often ahead of me, with a battered set of documents, annotated in her sloping quick handwriting. And she knew her law. I never really understood why she did not study law - she studied domestic science, which I remember being a bit horrified by, before I realized the value of being a decent cook. She read laws and bills like they were novels, ploughing through reams of paper every night with a small whisky at her side. Ok, large whisky.

And she knew everyone, and seemed to value them all. I don't recall her saying a mean or small minded thing, although she was could be ominously silent if you did or said something of which she did not approve. She once decided to call Frank Chikane, then DG in the office of the President, on some issue or other. He took her call, which she relayed with some surprise. She had no sense of herself as important, and was never very interested in discussing her personal life, although always interested in my worries about marriage and children.

I told her about Ciara being sick once, and she relayed how her own mother had advised her to drive her small sick children out to the cooling towers, because the air there was beneficial. She could do that easily: slip between law, and cooking, policy and child care, bringing her intelligence and compassion to everything presented to her, considering individual people just as important as big issues. I didn't just admire her; I sought and seek to emulate her. I won't succeed entirely, but when I do, it will be a good day.

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Regards
Alison Tilley
ODAC