

CITATION - DOROTHY CLEMINSHAW

Dorothy Cleminshaw exemplifies a life well lived in the service of others and in the defence of principles of justice and honesty. To trace the events of her life is to record the history of individuals of courage and of movements which, although they may have seemed powerless, were able to uphold the values of true democracy and the rule of law even through periods in South African history when they were most under threat.

As a very young woman, she did clerical work in the Defence Department in Pretoria during the war, and when the war was over she returned to Cape Town. She worked as a secretary, while studying through UNISA for a BA degree. She married Harry Cleminshaw, and together they served in the Torch Commando, where he was treasurer and she was secretary of the Green and Sea Point branch.

She was an active member of the Liberal Party, and deeply involved in the intense debates of the time: the National Party had been elected into power in 1948, and re-elected with increased majorities in 1953 and subsequent elections. The Liberal Party stood for civil rights and liberties for all South Africans, and was increasingly in conflict with apartheid policies. In 1950, the Suppression of Communism Act had banned the South African Communist Party and made it an offence to further the aims of communism; it gave the State President wide powers to “list” individuals (not only those who had been members of the SACP), prohibiting them from various activities and providing for house arrest and other restrictions.

The 1950s witnessed the growing resistance of the majority of the population, in the Defiance Campaign of the ANC and the convening of the Congress of the People in Kliptown in 1955 and its adoption of the Freedom Charter. This was matched by increased repression, and at the end of 1956 a wave of arrests heralded the start of the first major treason trial.

What could one person do, in this climate where so many people were filled with fear and reluctant to take action? Dorothy Cleminshaw found ways to be active, while making as certain as she could that her children, husband, mother were not put at risk.

As a representative of the Liberal Party, she joined the Defence and Aid Fund, until it was banned, supporting political prisoners and their families. When some of its work was taken over by the Dependents Conference, she worked for it too. She joined the Civil Rights League, and through it was able to challenge many of the infringements of rights which were to follow.

She was approached by Dr “Bill” Hoffenberg and others to work for SACHED, the organisation which sought to provide alternative educational opportunities for those for whom Bantu Education was the only option afforded by the state.

She worked for a period for the Institute of Race Relations, and for Zonnebloem College, but she also maintained a steady volunteer involvement in upholding the rights of those who were increasingly being pursued by the state: she monitored trials, she kept lists of people being held in detention without trial, she took part in demonstrations (and got arrested), she kept in touch with other people who were involved in similar work. When Helen Joseph undertook a trip around the country to visit people who were under banishment orders, it was in Dot's house that her account was recorded on tape. When Albie Sachs was detained, it was Dot who managed to maintain contact with him. When friends were on trial, she attended the courts and supported their families. She wrote letters and articles for the press. She persuaded others – an impressive list of well-known names – to take action, to organise meetings, to oppose injustice.

These activities carried a risk, and a cost. There were murmurings about her, that she was not a true liberal, but a communist, that working with her could have negative impacts on the organisations she worked with. Wounding, damaging, impossible to disprove. She resigned from several organisations, but maintained her commitment to continue working for what she believed was right.

She was watched, her house was searched, she was charged and convicted for possession of banned documents. While she and her husband and children were away, security police raided their house regardless of the anxiety caused to her mother staying there alone: an experience which was not alleviated by the fact that one of the policemen fell through her kitchen ceiling during the search, even if that did become material for a David Marais cartoon. Later in her career she was summonsed to appear before the Schibusch Commission, she was charged, tried and convicted with Ds Beyers Naude and others, and had her passport removed.

Her membership of the Civil Rights League gave her the opportunity to work with a small group of people to achieve a great deal, through the organisation of public discussions and the publication of a number of documents. The League organised an important conference on Conscientious Objection to military service – this was eventually to become a major issue as young men refused on political as well as religious grounds to serve in the military forces. Her personal support for many of them has been acknowledged as having been of great encouragement. The material presented at the Conference, as well as the resolution passed by the conference, served as the basis for churches and other organisations to take up the matter.

During the 1970s she worked with the Revd David Russell (now retired Bishop of Grahamstown), who had been appointed to work among the migrant workers of Cape Town. December 1976 was a time of particularly violent conflict, apparently between the migrant workers and the more settled residents of the black townships. A report was published based on affidavits taken from local people, entitled “The Role of the Riot Police in the Killings and Burnings, Nyanga, December 1976” - this was banned for possession as well as being “undesirable”. So another report was published, called “The Riot Police and the Suppression of Truth” – also of course immediately banned, providing further grounds for searches and seizures of these documents. Together with

Revd. Russell, Revd. Moses Moletsane, Bishop Patrick Matolengwe and Father Dick O’Riordan, she was tried and convicted for the distribution of these documents.

Another organisation which played a significant role in Dot Cleminshaw’s life was the Christian Institute, established after the Cottesloe Conference in 1963. Although she was not herself a Christian, she so much identified with the goals of the Institute that she became a member, and an active supporter. Working closely with the Rev Theo Kotze in Cape Town, she contributed to the SPROCAS (Study project on Christianity in an Apartheid Society) reports. In 1972 the government appointed the Schlebusch Commission to investigate NUSAS, the University Christian Movement, the South African Institute of Race Relations and the Christian Institute. The hearings were held in camera, and a number of individuals refused to testify – and were charged and convicted accordingly, including Ds Beyers Naude, Revd. Theo Kotze and Dot Cleminshaw.

In 1977 she was able to travel with her husband, and they went on holiday to the United States as well as to Britain. The death in detention of Steve Biko on 12 September that year catapulted her into speaking to a number of significant audiences in both countries. Her extensive knowledge of the experiences of people in detention, and her awareness of the numbers of people who had died in detention, would have stood her in good stead.

On October 19th that year a large number of organisations were banned, including the newspaper The World, many organisations associated with Black Consciousness, and also the Christian Institute. When the CI offices in Cape Town, based in Mowbray, were closed down and its property confiscated, along with all the goods and furniture went the addressograph plates for the mailing of a publication called Bandwagon. Dot Cleminshaw served on the editorial board of this newsletter (with Theo Kotze, Ivor Shapiro, James Cochrane and James Polley), which gave news of people who had been banned, and kept them in contact with one another and a wider circle. But Bandwagon was not part of the Christian Institute, and therefore ought not to have been affected – she demanded their material from the security police, and eventually succeeded in getting back several hundred copies of Bandwagon – but which had been banned!

Dating back to 1963 and 1964, with the introduction of 90-day detention and then 180-day detention, those who supported human rights were united in their opposition to detention without trial, and to the potential this created for the use of torture. The growing list of those who died during their detention rallied people to take action in the form of protest meetings and campaigns, and Dot Cleminshaw did all she could to support these actions. Her concern over the deaths of, for example, Imam Abdullah Haron in 1969, of Mapetla Mohapi, and so many others, led her to write an important article on the role of torture, published in ProVeritate, and then a pamphlet which was to have been widely distributed – but was almost instantly banned (but not before a number of copies were widely distributed!). In 1981 she was tried and convicted for possessing a copy of Aelred Stubbs’ edited collection of essays by Steve Biko, entitled “I Write What I Like”. Rather than paying a fine, she served a short sentence in Pollsmoor Prison. Subsequently, her conviction was overturned in a successful appeal to the Supreme

Court. The judgment had a salutary effect in reducing the punitive effects of the Publications Control Act.

A concern which she brought to the Civil Rights League was over the role played by the judiciary in an unjust society. After debate within the organisation, and correspondence with judges and lawyers, she compiled a paper, which was issued by Brian Bishop, then chairperson of the League, on "The role of the judiciary in applying unjust laws". It was sent to all South African judges and published in newspapers, arousing considerable discussion and controversy.

After 1982, when she underwent major back surgery, she was obliged to give up full-time involvement in much of this work. Undeterred, however, she decided to focus her energies on specific issues and pursue them with all her considerable commitment and experience. She had joined the Black Sash in 1963 and within that organisation participated in a number of campaigns and was a strong advocate for human rights. She devoted particular time and energy towards efforts to reform the country's legislation on abortion, a cause which was not always popular or comfortable even among those with whom she had often worked on other issues. Together with a small band of other activists, she made a significant difference to public opinion and awareness, and contributed towards improvements in the law.

In more recent times, she has taken up the cudgels on behalf of those people identified by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as victims of gross violations of human rights. Using the same tools as she has always employed, she has written letters to the press, letters to the authorities, drafted documents to assist groups supporting the victims and their families, and explored the law to see where arguments can be made for justice to be done.

Dorothy Cleminshaw's life has touched, and been touched by, many people who have served the cause of freedom, justice and peace. Many of those people have paid a very heavy price for their dedication. She has lived and worked through a period which has tested the capacity and endurance of South Africans, and she has found ways in which she, as one individual, has been able to make a real contribution to the causes in which she believes. She demonstrates that it is indeed possible, with a clear focus and much dedication, to increase awareness and to influence decisions.

Vice-Chancellor, it is an honour for me to present to you, for the degree of Master of Social Sciences, *honoris causa*, Dorothy Cleminshaw.

Mary Burton
University of Cape Town
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