

INTRODUCTIONS TO SPEAKERS AT THE TENTH ALAN PATON LECTURE ON 15 MAY 2003

PETER BROWN served in the South African Army in North Africa and Italy as a signaller and after the war gained a BA from UCT. His first jobs were in Edendale in the employ of the Local Health Commission and the YMCA.

In December 1952, with Phoebe his wife, he called together the first meeting of the Pietermaritzburg Liberal Society. This became a branch of the Liberal Party of which Peter was the Natal provincial secretary. In 1954 he stood as a provincial council candidate for Pietermaritzburg South and in 1958 for Pietermaritzburg District in the national elections. That same year he became National Chair of the party just as South Africa was turning into a full-blown police state. He was detained on 29 March 1960 and held for three months in Pietermaritzburg gaol, characteristically refusing to be released conditionally while others were still held without trial under Emergency regulations.

In the 1960s, Peter turned to extra parliamentary politics. One of his many contributions to the Liberal Party was recruitment among rural communities, which led to his involvement with the Northern Natal African Landowners Association. His party commitment carried on after it disbanded in 1968 with the editorship of Reality, which perpetuated the spirit of liberalism through the written word.

On 25 July 1964 he was banned, a state of affairs that was to last for ten years in spite of public protest. During this time he took on the family farm and it was interesting to learn from an interview with Norman Bromberger that he managed to carry on playing polo. The focus of Peter's concern remained rural Natal. He was involved with the Church Agricultural Project at Mdukutshani and became the first chair of the Association for Rural Advancement, one of Pietermaritzburg's most significant NGOs, which dealt initially with the consequences of changes to labour tenancy and the government's policy of forced removal of so-called black spots.

In the early 1980s Peter was involved with Dependants Conference, a Council of Churches initiative to support the families of political prisoners, many of them on Robben Island. His political energies at the end of that decade also embraced the Five Freedoms Forum, a body with a liberal/social democrat flavour that brought together people who would need to understand and talk to one another in a democratic South Africa.

Three years ago the local authority awarded Peter a Civic Certificate of Commendation for his "dedication to justice ... the selfless work of decades ... and his quiet influence." This University had pre-empted that recognition in 1997 by giving Peter an honorary doctorate. In the view of many this honour was long overdue as Peter's life has been committed to political action based first on a highly principled analysis of the use of power and its consequences; and second on the exercise of his conscience. Peter is the quintessential liberal: there can be no-one better qualified to encapsulate Alan Paton's political life.

by Christopher Merritt

The Alan Paton Centre
& Struggle Archives



RECORDING THE ANTI-APARTHEID STRUGGLE IN
KWAZULU-NATAL

Oral History Project of the Alan Paton Centre,
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg Campus

Interview with Dr Peter Brown
conducted by Prof. Norman Bromberger
in Pietermaritzburg
on 14 August 1995

1st interview in a series of 8

(Edited, corrected version)

The interviewee has agreed to open access for use by researchers,
students and members of the public.

The interviewee has agreed that a copy of this interview transcript
may be housed at the National Archives of South Africa.

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