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OBITUARIES

Peter Brown

Twice-banned Liberal Party stalwart

PETER Brown, who has died in Pietermaritzburg at the age of 79, was a founding member of the Liberal Party and its national chairman.

The party was formed in 1953 and dissolved itself in 1968 when apartheid legislation made it impossible for it to continue as a non-racial political party.

Brown relieved party leader Alan Paton of the onerous burden of chairmanship in 1958 to give him more time to write.

In March 1960, 10 days after the Sharpeville massacre and one day after the panic-stricken National Party government declared a

state of emergency, Brown was arrested in front of his three small children. He was released after 58 days without being charged.

A week after his arrest the ANC and PAC were banned. The leadership of the Liberal Party came under pressure from within its ranks to drop its policy of non-violence. When Paton, unwaveringly supported by Brown, reiterated the party's opposition to violence, some members left.

Others stayed in the party while secretly engaging in sabotage for the leftist, mostly white, African Resistance Movement.

In 1964 one of them, a student

leader called Adrian Lefebvre, was arrested. The government made much of the fact that Lefebvre and other members of the ARM whom he betrayed to the police, were Liberal Party members.

Brown shared Paton's belief that all this would have devastating consequences for liberalism in South Africa and he was proved right.

Within days of Lefebvre's arrest Brown was served with a five-year banning order. He was restricted to Pietermaritzburg and prevented from being part of any gathering of more than two people.

The only thing that saved Paton from a similar fate was his international fame as the author of *Ory, the Beloved Country*.

When Brown's banning order expired in 1969 it was promptly renewed for another five years.

Brown was a keen polo player even though his father had been killed playing polo when he was seven. During his banning he could no longer go to play with the Otter's Bluff polo club. Most of its members abhorred his politics but they never betrayed him.

Brown was born on December 14 1924 into a wealthy Durban family. He attended Michaelhouse and was head boy. After matriculating he joined up to fight in World War 2 and saw service in North Africa and Italy.

After the war, while studying agriculture at Cambridge, Brown went

to a talk by the South African novelist Peter Abraham, who had written a book about the life of black South Africans. This awakened something in him and, still in his first year, he left Cambridge and returned, driving a car through Africa, to South Africa.

He studied African languages and Native Law and Administration at the University of Cape Town. After graduating he joined the local health commission in the black township of Edendale in the Natal Midlands and was instrumental in starting the Edendale YMCA and the Kwabonza Bantu charity for disabled people.

Brown's liberalism was always practical. One of the reasons the government was so keen to take him out of circulation was his mobilising of resistance to forced removals and farm evictions.

When his second banning order expired in 1974 he started the Association for Rural Advancement. Today it is a powerful NGO offering legal claims and opposing farm evictions.

In the 1980s he actively supported the government's land restitution. Until the end of his life Brown, always quietly, gave help where he felt it was needed, whether paying school and university fees or helping black farmers get started.

When Nadine Gordimer slugged off South African terms in a London interview in 1974, saying that "liberal" was to her "a dirty word" and liberals made promises they never kept, Paton offered Brown as the closest restitution.

People like Brown, said Paton, had made greater sacrifices than Gordimer.

Brown is survived by his wife Phoebe, daughter of industrialist Punch Barlow, and three children. — Chris Barns