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# Belinda Bozzoli (1945–2020): Historical sociologist, academic and politician

Professor Belinda Bozzoli, one of South Africa's leading historical sociologists who entered politics after a distinguished career in academia, died on 5 December 2020.

Her death, after a struggle with cancer, came as a great blow to her colleagues in Parliament. We valued Belinda for her incisive intellect, the original insights into our national condition that she delivered in strikingly wrought prose or speeches that made the House sit up and listen, and her complete mastery of the complex higher education portfolio. She combined warmth and compassion with an independent-mindedness that is all too rare in politics. Belinda had a keen sense of humour, and she could detect the ridiculous in the sublime and the sublime in the ridiculous. These were qualities that endeared her to generations of students, whose understanding of South African history and social dynamics she shaped through her infectious enthusiasm and rigorous scholarship.

Belinda Bozzoli was born on 17 December 1945 in Johannesburg. After matriculating from Parktown Girls' High in 1962, she was encouraged by her father Guerino – then Dean of Engineering at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) – to enrol for a BSc degree with science and engineering subjects. The course failed to capture her interest. She channelled her energies into the choral society and politics instead. After a year, Belinda switched to a BA degree in political science and geography, and graduated at the end of 1966.

A spell of teaching at a high school in London followed. During this time Belinda met her future husband, the historian Charles van Onselen, and a circle of Africanist scholars with similar interests. The idea of a career in African studies began to take shape. Belinda returned to Wits in 1969, where her father had recently been installed as Vice Chancellor, and took a first-class honours degree. A brief stint as a journalist on the *Rand Daily Mail* ensued, but the pull of higher education was strong. Belinda proceeded to read for her master's degree and doctorate at the University of Sussex. For much of the time she was based in Oxford where Van Onselen was pursuing his DPhil, and where the ideas of the History Workshop movement – with its emphasis on 'history from below' – exerted a powerful influence. The fortnightly seminar on African studies convened by Shula Marks at the University of London was also formative.

Belinda's doctoral thesis focused on the rise to dominance of South Africa's capitalist ruling class, and the role of intellectuals in expanding the cultural purchase of its worldview. The study, which drew on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, formed the basis of her first book, *The Political Nature of a Ruling Class: Capital and Ideology in South Africa, 1890-1933*, published in 1981.

It was natural that Belinda should return to Wits to build her academic career. The university was personally and intellectually part of her heritage. At the prompting of Dunbar Moodie, she successfully applied for a post in the Sociology Department, which she filled in January 1977. Over the next three and a half decades, Belinda served in a variety of leadership roles at Wits, including Head of Sociology (1996–1998); Head of the School of Social Sciences (2001–2003) and, ultimately, Deputy Vice Chancellor for Research.

Belinda's own research focused on the intersection between culture and politics. She was interested in the cultural tapestries of working-class people's lives. Although she was among the vanguard of Marxist scholars who charted a new course for South African historiography in the 1970s and 1980s, Belinda never reduced culture and politics to a mechanistic function of economics. She questioned the simplistic conflation of apartheid with capitalism. She resisted dogma and orthodoxy. And she was an early adopter of interdisciplinarity. Belinda's research output included numerous articles, among them the seminal 'Marxism, Feminism and Southern African Studies' (1983). She wrote a further two single-author books, *Women of Phokeng: Consciousness, Life Strategy, and Migrancy in South Africa* (1991) and *Theatres of Struggle and the End of Apartheid* (2004). And she edited several books that emerged from the Wits History Workshop which she helped establish in the late 1970s.<sup>1–3</sup> Modelled on the Oxford History Workshop, it weaved historical, sociological and political research and forged links with creative arts practitioners as well as trade unions. In 2006, Belinda was the first sociologist to receive an A-rating from the National Research Foundation (NRF).<sup>4</sup> She later served on the NRF Board as Chairperson. Belinda's scholarship was internationally recognised, and she held fellowships at Yale, Oxford, Cambridge and the *École des hautes études en sciences sociales* in France.

Having reached retirement age at Wits, but with much still to offer, Belinda successfully stood for Parliament in the 2014 election under the Democratic Alliance (DA)'s banner. She was appointed as the DA's Shadow Minister for Higher Education and Training (the portfolio was expanded to include Science and Technology after the 2019 election), a position for which she was equipped with a wealth of experience. Belinda held successive cabinet ministers' feet to the fire with her in-depth subject knowledge, dogged questioning and assiduous oversight. She used the parliamentary mechanisms at her disposal to maximum effect, but was horrified by the thin veneer of executive accountability.<sup>5</sup>

For all that, she took her own responsibilities seriously and mined her portfolio. She realised the core problem with South Africa's higher education system is its unsustainable funding model. In Belinda's own words, the country was 'trying to operate the most generous...system in the world in one of the most desperate and failing economies in the world'.<sup>6</sup> She worried that the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) had become so consumed with the practicalities of student funding and welfare that it had lost sight of teaching, learning and research excellence. DHET, she maintained, was 'stagnant and bureaucratically overburdened', with several dysfunctional entities.<sup>7</sup>

By contrast, the Department of Science and Innovation (DSI) – within whose ambit the NRF and *Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR)* fall – was, in Belinda's view, a 'well-run gem'. She marvelled at the research being done locally in robotics, nanotechnology, advanced astronomy, climate science, bio-innovation, and the hydrogen economy, among others, and she celebrated our 'many top researchers, some world class, who do this work'. But Belinda acknowledged that the DSI was 'one of the most neglected Departments in government' with a paltry (and shrinking) budget that barely equalled the budget of just one of our major universities. She worried how the DSI would fare in a merger with DHET, predicting it would be a 'litmus test' of the seriousness with which the government takes its commitment to the Fourth Industrial Revolution.



Belinda Bozzoli was as enthused by science and technology as she was by her own disciplinary interests. As her eldest son, Gareth, said of her in a moving eulogy: Belinda 'marveled at architecture and engineering and medicine. She was in awe of nature and biology, of both the universe and the atom. And she immersed herself in theory and debate, in sociology and history, in politics, science and philosophy'.<sup>8</sup>

Having touched the lives of so many personally, Belinda leaves a great void in our communal intellectual and political life, too. Heartfelt condolences to her husband Charles, and children, Gareth, Jessica and Matthew.

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