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Rolf Stumpf (1945–2020): Tough, decisive and compassionate technocratic-intellectual

Reflecting on the career of Rolf Stumpf, who passed during late October 2020 from cancer, reminded me of a meeting I had around 1992 with the famous Hungarian sociologist Ivan Szelenyi, who had started working on his very interesting book *Making Capitalism without Capitalists* (Verso, 1998). With the South African transition looming, he was interested, from a Hungarian perspective, in what made certain communists successful in the new capitalist Hungary and he wanted to know if I was interested in doing a similar study in South Africa. The transition became far too busy for me to consider another study, but the central theme of Szelenyi's work was that one of the characteristics of a successful transition was their distinctive technocratic-intellectual elites who were both successful communists and successful capitalists.

As we started thinking about establishing the National Education Policy Investigation project to rethink higher education in the forthcoming post-apartheid era, I was told that I must talk to Rolf Stumpf who was then on the 'other side' in government in the higher education division of the South African Department of Education. From the first moment it was clear that this statistician knew the university sector like nobody that I knew, and that he was also passionate about making it a successful sector in post-apartheid South Africa. Alas, Rolf moved very quickly to the 'new side' when he was asked by then President De Klerk, in consultation with the ANC, to save the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) for the new South Africa (1991).

The HSRC showed different sides of Rolf: tough and decisive but compassionate. He retrenched a large number of 'apartheid deadwoods' but told me how difficult it was and how in some cases he had to go to the homes of retrenched employees to explain to their spouses that the employee had not done something wrong at work; he once said with a chuckle, 'But I could not tell the spouse that he had also not done anything at work.' When the HSRC fortress needed painting, Rolf embarked on a consultation process, but after a week of no progress and conflict, he gave a colour chart to his secretary and said 'You decide' – the building is still the same colour, albeit not universally loved.

So when Prof. Bhengu, then Minister of Education, asked some of us for names for possible members of the Nelson Mandela appointed National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), Rolf was very high on the list. He was a huge resource who knew how the old system worked (he had partially designed the funding system for it) and we trusted him as somebody who was committed to transformation.

And he 'saved' the NCHE: when Prof. Teboho Moja (advisor to Minister Bengu) and I said that we were leaving the NCHE because we could not work in the chaotic offices of the new Education Department, Rolf immediately said 'come to the HSRC', where he provided us not only with generous office space in the purple palace, but also with secretarial and financial services. We would never have finished the NCHE on time without Rolf's support.

We spent long hours with Rolf during the 2 years of the NCHE where we became more than commissioners – we became a close group trying to design a new higher education system. It was during this time that Prof. Moja and I received funding from Ford Foundation to establish the Centre for Higher Education Transformation (CHET), which was launched in the HSRC despite me having written a polemical article a few years earlier arguing for the closure of the HSRC – but that was before Rolf started there. It was also a 'no brainer' for Rolf to be on the first Board of CHET with luminaries like Walter Kamba (Vice Chancellor of the University of Zimbabwe), Brenda Gourley (Vice Chancellor of the University of KwaZulu-Natal) and Mike O'Dowd (Director of Anglo America).

Most of us lost touch with Rolf during his time at Stellenbosch University, and the language struggles, which he lost. But Stellenbosch's loss was the University of Port Elizabeth's gain. He became the Vice Chancellor of the old University of Port Elizabeth (UPE) and was exactly the right person to become the CEO and Vice Chancellor of the three merged institutions (UPE, Port Elizabeth Technikon and the Port Elizabeth campus of Vista University). The unusual title of CEO showed that he was serious about management – which was really his forte in life.

Soon after the merger was announced, Rolf phoned me and said that he had a problem with naming the new institution. The mayor wanted to include Port Elizabeth in the name and Rolf wanted Mandela in the new name, but the Mandela Foundation had informed him that it would need approval through a lengthy and difficult process involving Adv. Bezos.

I then phoned Jakes Gerwel, the Director-General in the Presidency, and he said he liked the idea and I must give him a few days to talk to the man himself. Two days later, Gerwel phoned and said Mr Mandela had agreed and would be honoured, but to accommodate the mayor, why not call it Nelson Mandela Metro University – and if Metro is included, it does not need Mandela Foundation approval – and Adv. Bezos also liked the idea. Another master stroke from the great man himself and a few days later Rolf made the announcement. And as we know, in 2017 the name was changed to Rolf's original idea: Nelson Mandela University.

Nelson Mandela University, along with the University of Johannesburg, which is also a merger of a traditional university with a technikon, is arguably the most successful merger in South Africa and a university that is the pride of the Eastern Cape and will for a very long time have the stamp of Rolf Stumpf on it. It took a very special person to merge three very different institutional cultures. In a [tribute](#), the current Vice Chancellor, Professor Sibongile Muthwa said:

He delicately, skilfully and successfully steered our University through what was a complex merger process, leaving us with a viable institution that we can be proud of.



He remains one of the most respected leaders in the South African higher education sector.

After contributing to fixing the public higher education system, he told Prof. Moja in March 2020 how he was enjoying working with colleagues in private higher education as well. He also tried fixing the Botswanan higher education system when he was asked by their National Council to develop a quality assurance system for their higher education system.

When Rolf became sick, I had a brief conversation with him in which he told me he had just completed a very interesting evaluation of efficiency at Stellenbosch University. To the end Rolf was committed to changing and improving higher education in Africa.

To return to Szelenyi, Rolf Stumpf could certainly be characterised as a technocratic-intellectual who moved seamlessly from one regime to another, but with a difference. Rolf never joined either the National Party or the ANC, but he was committed to democracy with a strong belief that a healthy higher education and science system was an essential ingredient.



Photo: Nelson Mandela University News