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Zach de Beer: Man of integrity

Former Progressive Federal Party leader COLIN EGLIN pays tribute to one of his closest political half a century

WITH the death of Zach de Beer South Africa has lost one of its most respected figures. His public life spanned nearly 50 years - from student leader to South African ambassador to the Netherlands.

He was known by many as an individual of impeccable integrity and courtesy. Zach will be remembered for keeping liberal values alive during the '60s, '70s and '80s - the darkest days of National Party rule.

He was born in Cape Town in 1928. His father, also Zacharias Johannes, was a doctor and a member of a well-known Cape Afrikaner family. His mother was Scots and spent much time developing theatre in the Cape Peninsula.

Zach went to school at Diocesan College (Bishops) and enrolled for a medical degree at the University of Cape Town where he was elected president of the students' representative council.

After the 1948 election, which swept the Nats to power, he became a sought-after speaker at opposition meetings.

In 1953, at 25, he was elected to Parliament as the United Party member for Maitland. This occasion, on which I was his election campaign manager, was the first of many De Beer/Eglin ventures in politics.

In Parliament, he made his mark as a fluent analytical speaker. It was then that Zach and Harry Oppenheimer, then the MP for Kimberley, formed a life-long friendship.

Zach was one of the 12 MPs, including Helen Suzman, who broke away from the UP in 1953 to form the liberal Progressive Party.

He proved invaluable in getting the fledgling party off the ground.

It was in this period that he ended his medical career - feeling that he could not do justice to both his practice and his political commitments.

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In 1961, the party lost 11 of its 12 seats in Parliament - Suzman being the only Prog survivor.

Zach went on to play an active extra-parliamentary party role, and also entered business - becoming an executive director of P N Barrett Ltd, a Cape Town-based advertising agency.

Later, in the '60s, Zach moved to Johannesburg to take up an appointment with the Anglo American Corporation.

In the early '70s he was posted to Lusaka to head up Anglo's operations in Zambia where he developed a good working relationship with President Kenneth Kaunda.

Zach returned to Parliament in 1977 for a three-year spell as a Progressive Federal Party MP.

In the '80s he became an executive-director of Anglo and headed the property, insurance and construction divisions.

In 1988 he returned to Parliament as PFP leader. He initiated negotiations with the Independent Party and the National Democratic Movement which culminated in the formation of the Democratic Party in March 1988. Zach led the party during the 1994 elections.

He played an important role in the early stages of the Convention for a Democratic South Africa, co-chairing its management committee.

He quit Parliament after the elections, but was appointed ambassador to the Netherlands. For two years he filled this post until ill health forced him to resign.

At the time of his death he was enjoying retirement with his wife, Mona, in his apartment overlooking the Atlantic at Clifton in Cape Town.

Zach de Beer, was a student leader, policy formulator, advertising executive, executive director in SA's major business house, political leader, constitutional negotiator, polished diplomat - and add to these qualities, loyal friend and caring person.

Well done, Zach. You made a difference to the lives of many of your fellow South Africans. You will be remembered with gratitude, affection and respect.

Rest in peace.

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