

Commentary

Comments on the occasion of the memorial service for Glenn Cowley, Howard College, Durban, 25 June 2011

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Introduction

We often refer to occasions like this as celebrations, as an opportunity to salute a life well lived and it is in many respects that. But I suspect that the greater reality tonight is that for us here this is a very sad event. We have all been utterly stunned, shocked to the core, at Glenn's early passing and the fact that he has been so cruelly deprived of a leisurely retirement in the happy company of his new wife and in their new lovely home in Johannesburg. It is only 20 months since we gathered at Ike's Bookshop to pay tribute to Glenn on the occasion of his retirement from the UKZN Press, a tribute organised by the Board of *Transformation*. None of us there that night, I am certain, even contemplated the possibly that we would so soon gather again, this time for a final farewell.

Much has been said tonight about Glenn the publisher and what Glenn did for academic scholarship in post-apartheid South Africa but my association with Glenn goes back over 40 years to our student days and so I want to say something about him in that time.

Glenn the student activist

We met at this university in 1964. We were then both SRC presidents on the respective white campuses of the then University of Natal. The campus struggle issue of the time was around the continuing affiliation of the two campuses to the left-leaning and non-racial National Union of South African Students (NUSAS). This was a difficult time politically for the left in general and for NUSAS particularly both on campus and in the national arena. The

organization was under sustained attack from the then hard man of apartheid politics, minister of justice BJ Vorster, who referred to NUSAS as ‘a cancer in the life of South Africa’ and declared it his intention to wipe out the organization. What particularly irked Vorster was the fact that in July 1964 NUSAS had re-elected ANC president and Nobel laureate, Chief Albert Luthuli, as its honorary president. Then under house arrest, Luthuli was to Vorster at best a communist fellow traveler.

The arrest in July 1964 of a number of recent leading figures in NUSAS (Adrian Leftwich, Hugh Lewin, John Lloyd, Stephanie Kemp, David de Keller, Selina Molteno, Lynette van der Riet and others) on charges of sabotage for their activities in the African Resistance Movement (ARM) triggered a barrage of National Party vitriol and efforts by government-funded conservative student groupings on the English-language campuses to get them to disaffiliate from NUSAS. None succeeded and NUSAS lived on to outlive Vorster and the remainder of the apartheid era. It voluntarily dissolved itself in 1992.

Here in Durban Glenn and his great friend, Ian Robertson, were at the forefront of those who we were determined to thwart Vorster’s ambition. It was no easy task, made more difficult by the fact that our two campuses were at the time densely populated by white Rhodesian students, a grouping then mobilised and politicised, cock-a-hoop at what appeared then to be a successful UDI in favour of white rule in Rhodesia. Stridently arrogant in their racism, their hostility to anyone and any campus group which did not share their outlook was highly vocal and not a little frightening.

That their campaign and that of Vorster’s failed was in large part on this campus due to Glenn’s powerful and effective leadership. Not only did he stand up to and take on the ‘Rhodies’ and their conservative allies led then by Renier Schoeman (later a National Party cabinet minister), but he charmed and wooed the great majority of non-partisan students into following his line and not theirs.

Glenn was not an overly political person in a party political sense; he was not unlike some on both of the white campuses either a covert ANC or SACP member. In fact, he had no great political ambitions for himself. What led him and guided his actions was a simple sense of what was right, a sense of political decency and a passion for justice. It was these factors that led him into many a campus fight and on this campus he never lost a single political battle.

It was these same convictions that led him to leave South Africa after graduation and to stay away in a self-enforced exile of nearly 25 years. Under apartheid, South Africa was a place where Glenn felt he could not live but when it changed and he could return, he did so and again he sought an area where he could apply his values and make a difference and make it he did. The UKZN Press will be his great legacy but we who knew and loved him dearly know that he was so much more – a wonderful, warm, human being, a man you could not but help like and love.

Some tributes

In these last few weeks as we tried to cope with Glenn's passing, many of his friends have been in e-mail communication. We have shared our grief, recalled old tales, excavated old pictures. I would like to share with you tonight extracts from three of those exchanges as collectively they help build a fuller picture of a dear friend and comrade.

The first is from **Robert Molteno**, an old school mate of Glenn's at Bishops in Cape Town and a fellow publisher. Like many of the white student activists of the 1960s, Robert chose to go into exile from South Africa and in London was one of the founders of the progressive publishing co-operative, Zed Books. The tribute below is taken from an article Robert published in *Pambazuka News* on 20 May 2011.

Footballers (and author) huddling in an unusual pose – not on the playing field, but around their publisher, Glenn Cowley. The scene is Ike's Bookshop, Durban, May 2004, just a few days before FIFA awarded South Africa the right to host the 2010 World Cup. Glenn is beaming next to Henry 'Black Cat' Cele, the former goalkeeper, at the launch of Peter Alegi's *Laduma! Soccer, Politics and Society in South Africa*. Bald of head, bronzed, tense of movement, rimless spectacles flashing in the light stands the man who transformed the University of KwaZulu-Natal Press. During the 11 years (1998-2009) that he ran it, Glenn turned it from an inconspicuous, sleepy little university publisher – just one among several in post-apartheid, newly democratic South Africa – into a significant force in scholarly publishing.

Another glimpse of this very private of men, this one from a lifetime ago. The year is 1966. Senator Bobby Kennedy, wearing the mantle of his murdered brother, President John F Kennedy, daring the brutal and clumsy apartheid government of the day to deny entry to the man who looked like being the next United States President. Barnstorming into the country to defy segregation and celebrate liberty, if not liberation. And the young Glenn Cowley, still in his twenties, President of the

Students Representative Council of the University of Natal, welcoming him to the campus in Durban. It may sound like just an exciting moment in a student leader's life, welcoming the 'big man' politician. But in South Africa it was an act of courage and defiance of the whole apartheid system.

Glenn brought to the University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, when asked to become its publisher in 1998, an unusually broad experience of the world of publishing. Unlike any other South African publisher, he knew the American scene from his long years in New York, and moved easily in international publishing circles. Perhaps the single most important thing he brought to his new role, and where he made the most significant contribution to South African scholarly publishing, was his acute awareness that successful publishing of intellectual books means never letting up on the importance of marketing. Selecting 'good' manuscripts, or 'impressive scholars' as authors, is only the beginning; giving a real voice to an author requires attention to the intellectually less glamorous work of marketing.

Glenn believed that a university publisher had no secure future as an independent voice unless it abandoned being subsidized by its parent university. This was particularly important in South Africa where financial pressures soon made such self-indulgent funding almost impossible. Instead, he brought to South Africa the lesson of so many successful North American university presses. These, in addition to their scholarly output, often developed a complementary publishing programme that produced high quality, non-fiction 'trade' books that reached out to a much wider readership. The books Glenn brought out at UKZN Press on soccer and cricket, as well as history, are good examples of how he translated this strategy into the South African context. And it was this that has given the Press a much more secure financial future, an unprecedented expansion in its scale of operation, and a significant trade presence in South African publishing.

I had the pleasure of knowing Glenn at both ends of his life – as a schoolboy all those years ago, and again as a publisher when he regularly travelled overseas and sold rights on his titles to Zed Books and other publishers in the United States and Britain, and also bought books from us for the South African market. I remember with great affection his sense of humour, and trenchant turn of phrase – striking, funny, uncompromisingly clear sighted. He was a very able man, energetic, and with all the confidence of having successfully operated in the sharply competitive world of New York publishing. He was comfortable with, and aware of, the new political and intellectual context of democratic

South Africa. And like all the best people in publishing, he refused to see books as just another ‘product’ (an attitude large corporations in the publishing world are too often tempted to fall for). Instead, he was a lover of the process in all its aspects, someone who liked and appreciated his authors, and a man who valued the place books can play in the unfolding life of a country.

Hamba kahle, Glenn, go well, *Malume* (Uncle) not just from the nephews and nieces who loved you greatly, but from a whole number of young South Africans in publishing who learned from you so much of their craft.

The second tribute is from **Angela Ndinge-Muvumba** and her partner **Tor Sellstrom**, both of whom knew Glenn during their time at the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD), an NGO near Durban. They wrote from Sweden:

Glenn was for us a wonderful door that opened into a world of brilliance, wit, grace and dignity. We met him and UKZN Press at a special dinner in Maputo and when Tor and I first fell in love. We are fortunate that we knew him at the same time, briefly and can miss him together. You couldn’t help but love him, respect him and be better for having known him. I cannot write any more. I am crying for how sudden and sharp this loss is.

Finally, a moving homily from Glenn’s dear friend and political mentor, **Ian Robertson**. Ian wrote this from Morocco where he now lives.

I first noticed Glenn Cowley when we were students at this university in 1964. The then President of NUSAS, Jonty Driver, had just delivered a fiery but rather pontificating speech to the assembled freshmen, and now invited questions. Up popped Glenn’s hand with the first question. “Yes?” said the President. “How can we get rid of you?” asked Glenn. I immediately introduced myself to this interesting character, beginning a close friendship that endured on three continents over almost half a century. We were successive presidents of the Durban SRC, served on the NUSAS executive, attended Harvard together, wandered with shoulder-length hair and bell-bottom pants from Canada to the jungles of Guatemala, studied at the same Oxford College, lived in New York City for many years, and spent our working lives in the publishing industry.

So I knew Glenn very well indeed, and the Glenn I knew was so unique as to be a force of nature. His energy and charisma lit up any room he entered. His mind was quick and original, always cutting to the heart of

the matter with a trenchant, colourful phrase or two. He pondered deeply on life's ironies and mysteries. He was courageous and honourable and, to use an old-fashioned word that fits him perfectly, gallant. He spread mirth and joy wherever he went. Glenn Cowley was a good, good man: always helpful, always considerate, always warm, always kind, always generous. It's almost impossible for me to imagine a world without Glenn Cowley. I will miss him in a thousand ways for the rest of my life. But the one thing I know I will miss the most of all is: Glenn's laughter.

So Glenn, this farewell, from Shakespeare:

Good night, sweet prince,
And may flights of angels
Sing thee to thy rest.

The toast

I have been asked to end this part of the proceedings with a toast. We will all remember Glenn in a myriad of different ways. For me, he was as decent a human being I will ever know, a man of deep conviction and courage, a man with an ice-breaking smile and an infectious laugh, a great publisher, a varsity activist and a treasured drinking buddy. Glenn loved his whiskey and with it good conversation. It's that time of the evening that wherever he is, Glenn will be enjoying a tot or two or three so lets join him one last time and affirm our love for a true prince of gallantry.