

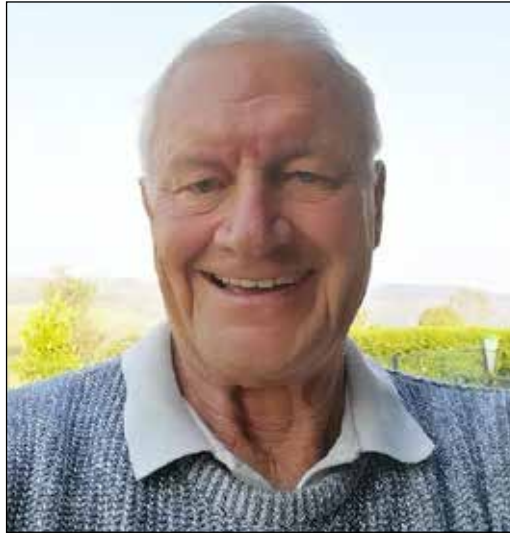
Peter Mansfield, 1941–2025

by R.W. Johnson

I was a first-year student at the University of Natal (Durban, UND) when I first saw Peter Mansfield. The previous year the organisers of the Rag Relay (in which teams from UND and UNP raced one another from Pietermaritzburg to Durban) had invited the African and Indian students at the University's City Buildings (the so-called UNNE, University of Natal Non-European, section) to participate and they had provided their own team, which acquitted itself well. But the National Party government had taken note and the relevant minister had now warned that if the university again broke the apartheid laws in this way, all their sporting teams would be banned from the leagues and competitions they played in.

This produced a packed student meeting in which Peter, all alone, argued passionately that we couldn't turn our backs on our fellow black students and must invite them again to run. He was sure the government was bluffing: they wouldn't really want a big international scandal if they inflicted such sweeping revenge on sportsmen and women purely in the cause of racial segregation. But the campus conservatives, allied to the sportsmen, booed him and demanded that we 'keep politics out of sport'. Over and over again Peter returned to the podium, pointing out that it was the government, not him, who were bringing politics into sport. It was a truly heroic lone performance, a clear demonstration that he held fast to his principles whatever the cost in unpopularity. He lost, of course.

Not long after, Peter approached me and asked if I would join him in running for the Student Representative Council (SRC). We were already marked as liberals and only just scraped in. We became great friends and endlessly strategised, trying to push liberal goals past our generally unwilling and conservative student body. Despite this, Peter gradually rose to become a popular



Peter Mansfield

SRC president and later, a vice-president of the National Union of South African Students.

Peter's father was a dairy farmer down at Ixopo and Peter was a graduate of Michaelhouse, an exclusive private school; which he cordially loathed. Given that he came from that background and was no intellectual, Peter might have been expected to be pretty conservative, but he had arrived at his liberal principles essentially as a matter of humane good feeling. In addition, he was a passionate and lifelong

admirer of John F. Kennedy; and when he heard of Kennedy's death he wept publicly.

After graduation Peter stayed in Durban and was active in the Progressive Party, several times standing for parliament. He was once declared elected only to lose on a recount, a farcical event which killed his parliamentary ambitions. Instead, he devoted himself to Durban municipal politics, then dominated by a fairly sleepy and conservative United Party (UP) majority. Peter recruited other young helpers and took aim at many of these established UP councillors, blitzing them with activist campaigns and toppling several dozen of them. The UP became the New Republic Party and then faded away, leaving the council with a three-way split between the Progs, the Nats and extreme conservatives. Peter realised that there was no Prog majority and that there was a danger of driving the Nats into alliance with the far right, so he set up a small independent group which negotiated a Prog-Nat coalition deal whereby each party provided the mayor by turns. But Peter had realised that the mayoralty was essentially a symbolic office and instead he became the long-serving chairman of the management committee – which actually ran the city.

Municipally, it was a golden age: Durban had never been so well run. Peter would work his way from

department to department, sorting out longstanding problems and re-energising the staff. Alighting on the Parks Department, for example, he found morale low, called all the staff together, told them how important their work was and gave them a pay rise. He then made a point of visiting every park in turn, chatting to the staff, hearing any grievances, sorting out problems and encouraging everyone. The parks bloomed.

By the late-1980s he had become concerned at the decline of the inner city and asked me if I knew anything about exhibition/conference centres. I got all the brochures from the Birmingham National Exhibition Centre and we spread them out on the floor: 'Just what we need,' Peter said, and began to push through the International Conference Centre (ICC); entirely financed from the city's own funds.

Then came De Klerk's speech of 2 February 1990. Peter immediately set up a sort of shadow council composed 50-50 of the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and African National Congress (ANC). He promised them that nothing would go through against their will, but that it was essential that they learned how to govern the city since they would soon be in charge. This made everything very complex: each measure now had to be negotiated through the Prog-Nat coalition and the IFP-ANC chamber as well. Only Peter could have done it.

A particular problem was Mike Sutcliffe, one of the ANC leaders: 'He just gets them to vote no to everything, it's a conditioned reflex,' Peter said. In particular this halted all progress on the ICC. In the end Peter went to the ANC boss, Jeff Radebe, and explained that it was vital, if he took over Durban, that there was a pipeline of projects coming his way. If he agreed to the ICC now, he would get the benefit later. Radebe saw the point, over-ruled Sutcliffe and the ICC went ahead. It was a huge success. Throughout this period Peter lived on an expenses allowance of R3 500 a month. When the ANC took over, Sutcliffe became city manager, doing Peter's job with a salary of several million rands a year.

When 1994 arrived, Peter announced he was stepping down. The city was in fine shape. Despite the huge expense of the ICC, Durban was one of the few large cities in the world with zero debt. The Democratic Party, IFP and ANC all asked Peter to run on their lists, but

he was adamant. All else apart he was now in his 50s, had no savings and realised he needed to make some money if he was ever to retire. 'The future of business lies with the internet,' he told me, 'so I shall set up an internet business.' What, I asked, did he know about the internet? 'Absolutely nothing,' he said.

Yet he did just that and soon there was a busy little office full of young women typing at computers and a clearly working business. I visited this office on many occasions. Peter often impressed on me the fragility of the business, but after about ten years he sold it for a good price and retired in comfort. Meanwhile, under ANC rule Durban had become a cesspit of corruption and the city was not only heavily indebted but faced virtual bankruptcy. Peter grimaced at the news, but said little.

We kept in touch to the very end. He died on 4 January 2025 and we'd had a long, good phone conversation only two days before. Our friendship had lasted over sixty years. Peter was often not an easy man; he could be moody, there were long silences and some people found him difficult. I didn't. To me he was always a fine and loyal friend, a warm companion and a man of great principle. From the time I first met him he was always concerned to serve the public and to show humanity to people of all races. He was completely honest and incorruptible.

I'll never forget a trip to Namibia we made together in 1990. At one point we stopped in the middle of the desert and wandered down to a dried-up river bed. Peter was on a ledge higher up than me and he began to laugh: 'I wouldn't stay there too long,' he said, 'We may have company.' I scrambled up and looked back. Everywhere around where I'd been standing were the footprints of a large lion. That rather summed Peter up to me: laughing in the face of danger.

Oddly, perhaps, it brought back memories of that Rag Relay debate all those years ago. Peter was a brave man, never scared to stand up for principle whatever the cost. He simply didn't care if what he stood for made him disliked or unpopular. He was focused on getting things done, and getting them done right. He achieved a great deal and left many people in his debt. I was proud to be his friend.