

EMBARGO: 11.00 am Saturday  
May 9

Mr Chancellor, I have the honour to present

GEORGE HOWE RANDELL

who was born in 1908 in Aliwal North, the son of a doctor who had served with the British forces in the Anglo-Boer War, and stayed behind to practise. An obituary notice described his father as a man of wide culture and liberal mind, with an unassuming bearing, a lucid and logical approach and an ability to take a courageous stand.

George's childhood was spent partly in England. It could easily have ended prematurely, had he and his family gone down in the Galway Castle in September 1918 on their return voyage to South Africa. But George lived to matriculate at the Marist Brothers College in Uitenhage, where the family had now settled, and then took a B.A. at Rhodes in Law and Economics, before proceeding to the LL.B. He was chosen as senior student, and had a distinguished sporting career as captain of the University's cricket and hockey teams, achieving provincial selection in the latter sport. The stories which have come from his sporting contemporaries record tough but humane captaincy, a very spectacular catch, and one considerable feat of oratory when the game was over.

A legal training qualified him for employment with the Cape Town firm of Fuller, De Klerk and Osler; but it was not long before he decided to apply for a position with Messrs Giddy, Giddy and White in East London. He explains in his draft memoirs that he wanted to go there because, living there as a teacher of art was the girl he had fallen in love with the day he saw her as a new student at Rhodes University College at the beginning of 1929, just after he had been elected chairman of the students' council.

Dorothy Farrow - or Dimmie, as she is popularly known - tells that as part of her initiation to university life in that year she and her contemporaries had been made to sit an 'entrance exam' in which one of the questions required them to 'write what you know about George Randell'. Whatever she knew or invented, our putative examiner and his candidate were married eight years later, and in due course became the parents of two talented daughters, one of whom has recalled a childhood memory of her father's gift for story-telling and his love of classical music.

The firm which Randell had joined ran into difficulties, so in 1935 he and a fellow employee set up their own partnership of Randell and Bax at 41 Oxford Street, where they conducted a successful business for a quarter of a century, acting as legal advisers to the municipality, and jointly putting together a key work of reference on Cape municipal law.

His business gave our honorary graduand a firm base in the life of East London upon which to build a career of community service, of which today's proceedings may be seen as one end result. He was elected president of the East London Side Bar Association. He worked hard, in association with Richard Godlo and Oscar Wollheim, for the promotion of legal aid for blacks. Above all, he showed that rare political quality of being able to enter public life to do battle for important causes without ever really having the expectation of being in the driving seat. In 1943 he fought the Provincial council seat of East London North as a Labourite when the United Party was in power; in 1959 as a United Party candidate when the Nationalists were in power. At first, even the local newspaper was against him; but it was an index of his performance that, after two contested elections, the

Dispatch went over to his side, and opposition melted away.

Provincial councils, until their extinction last year, had four main areas of responsibility: schools, hospitals, roads and the oversight of local government. In three of these areas George Randell became fully immersed. Let us take them seriatim.

The first trumpet blast in his 1943 campaign called for an educational revolution: more classrooms and smaller classes; more teachers and better salaries (at a time when a quarter of East London's female primary teachers earned under £15 a month, and all men less than £40); he wanted free and compulsory education for all children, state university scholarships for the talented, and learning opportunities for adults. Most of these were recurring themes over the next seventeen years. He later added another: the inclusion of pre-primary education in the state-run education system, which was too advanced an idea for the authorities in those days but nevertheless made some head way. His motion for a public inquiry into the Cape educational system was carried by 25 to 14 votes in the Provincial Council session of 1946, after nine of the government representatives had decided to cross the floor in support. When the motion achieved no result he returned to the attack next year. There was a change of government in 1948, but 1957 saw him returning to the attack again, at a time when the teacher shortage was still severe.

But if the battle over salaries and service conditions was a tough one in which he obtained only a modicum of success, George Randell had a great deal to show, while a provincial councillor, for his efforts in the building of schools. The years 1946-60 witnessed the erection of new junior school buildings for Selborne, the building of the Gonubie Park and the Sterling primaries, and of the Grens Hoerskool; the



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rebuilding of Cambridge High, the creation of a Domestic Science block for the Girls' High, which he had renamed Clarendon after one of our Governor-Generals, and - a fitting tribute to a man who, not surprisingly, had been made chairman of the School Board and served on several school committees - the building of the George Randell School (or the "G.R." as he modestly refers to it) on the West Bank. Letters of appreciation from three prominent educationalists of those days, Marjorie Hill, Ruth McJannett, and Pat McGaffin, leave no doubt as to his devoted services to education in East London.

On the health front, his main activities concerned the Hospital Board, on which he also served. At the risk of alienating the establishment, he took up the cause of the probationer nurses when one of them had the effrontery, like Oliver, to 'ask for more'. He led a campaign for the extension of hospital services, largely for the benefit of blacks. He also reacted with anger to a government plan to abolish the boards and place substantial controlling powers in the hands of the medical superintendents, for this infringed the principle which he cherished of decentralizing responsibility to the limits on democratic principles.

At the same time, he endorsed the Government's proposal to make access to hospital treatment free. He may have gained the Grand Prix for South Africa by securing its exemption from provincial tax, but Randell realized, as many others did not, that the taxing powers granted to provincial authorities were not equal to the capital requirements of an efficient hospital building programme. His answer was to propose the allocation of major capital expenditure to the central government, while leaving effective control of services in the hands of local boards; but this fell foul of those who thought that

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provincial autonomy was endangered by such a division of duties. As early as his second year in the Provincial Council, Randell came out in criticism of the structure of provincial government, and he kept coming back to its inadequacies throughout his years as a representative. He considered the Cape too large to administer properly, and became an old-style Eastern Cape separatist for pragmatic reasons, urging that an Eastern Cape Province should be established, with frontiers coinciding with the Eastern Cape Division of the Supreme Court, and a capital in either Grahamstown or Queenstown. He complained that councillors were not given adequate notice of Council agendas, and that sessions were far too short, with the result that the Administrator and his Executive Council could bulldoze decisions through. "The Government party" he wrote, acted "like flank forwards, with the Administrator as scrum-half"; and as a one-man party in the Council he could not have staged a filibuster like the nineteenth-century separatists did. He also argued that the liaison with Parliament was too informal, but was able to overcome this personally by attending meetings of the Labour Party caucus. He did not feel that the Council could become an effective debating chamber until it had its own Hansard. After proposing this in 1945 and in most budget debates thereafter, he eventually achieved it in 1960, just before his own resignation. The Province, he argued, should also have representation on local councils as well as on school and hospital boards, so that there could be effective liaison downwards as well. By securing his own election to the East London municipal council in 1949 he was able for a few years to prove the value of such links.

It hardly needs to be argued that the structure of provincial government was one of the weakest features of the constitution of

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1909. Had Randell's ideas been able to prevail, it is not easy to say whether he would have resolved the difficulties; but what can be said is that he would have tried to solve the problem by promoting a hierarchy of really responsible institutions from the bottom up, and he would not have supported the line eventually followed of abolishing the provincial councils and making the provincial executives take their orders from above.

After twenty-five years in East London, the Randells sold up and went on an indeterminate visit to England. Way back in 1938, George Randell had been inspired to write an indignant letter to the Outspan, protesting at the way the royal name of 'George' had been pilloried in Winder's cartoons. These featured an idiot with a round face and high blood pressure who answered to that maligned name. He had no difficulty in redeeming it with a string of references to men such as Washington, Handel, Bizet, Shaw, Robey, Byron and other Georges of both sexes. It must therefore have been with smug satisfaction that on arrival in London he was able to attach himself to the firm of George and George, even if the members decided to address each other as 'Mr James', 'Mr Edward' and 'Mr Randell'. But this Dickensian world of Jaggers, wigs and pens, which certainly tickled his sense of period comedy, had its frustrations as well as its funny side, and the Randells soon decided that London, England, was no substitute for London, South Africa.

They returned within a year or two to the eastern Cape, but it was in Grahamstown that they decided to live. There George Randell was for the first time admitted to the bar. Among other activities, he served as Chancellor to the Anglican diocese. On questions over which the Church's standards conflicted with state policy, his advice manifested



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a tactical wisdom which avoided the necessity of compromise, without causing embarrassment to officialdom. He also gave perceptive legal opinions on a variety of matters, inspired by what Bishop Duncan Buchanan has described as his "deep-rooted enjoyment of people". Advocate Randell also prepared a fourth edition of his reference work on municipal law, as well as his memoirs of his days in court, and did some teaching in the Law Faculty of Rhodes University.

The 'tale of two cities' which relates to today's proceedings, therefore, is essentially a tale of East London and Grahamstown. This is not the first time that Rhodes has seen fit to honour an East Londoner; but it is the first time that Rhodes has honoured one of its own graduates, himself an East Londoner by adoption and long service, at a ceremony - the first of its kind - in a hall, designed by the father of his bride, at the East London branch of our common university.

Mr Chancellor, would you kindly therefore convey the respect of our common university, on this historic occasion, to George Howe Randell, like his father a man of wide culture and liberal mind, and an unassuming bearing, a lucid thinker and a courageous fighter, by conferring on him the degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa.

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