

## The late Justice John Didcott SC

*Extracts from tributes:*

*Justice A Chaskalson, President of the Constitutional Court*

“John Didcott died on the 20th October after a long and debilitating illness. He was born on 14 August 1931, and after matriculating at Hilton College in 1948, went to UCT where he obtained a BA in 1951 and an LLB in 1953. At university he involved himself in student politics and gained a reputation as a powerful public speaker. He was twice elected as President of the Cape Town SRC and later became President of the National Union of South African Students.

John was a founder member of the Liberal Party which brought him to the attention of the security police. During the 1960 emergency he left the country to avoid detention, but fortunately he was not away for long, and he returned to the Durban Bar where he built up a large and lucrative practice. He took silk in 1967 and was Chairman of the Bar from 1973 to 1975. He served as an acting Judge of the Natal Provincial Division in 1971 and again in 1975 and in June 1975 he was appointed a Judge of that Court. In 1994 he became a member of the Special Electoral Court and later that year he was appointed to the Constitutional Court.

In April 1991, in recognition of his contribution to the University and of his attempts to promote justice in an unjust society, the University of Natal awarded the degree of Doctor of Laws, *Honoris Causa* to him. His contribution to law and society was also recognised by the University of Durban Westville which made him its Chancellor in 1989. He also received honorary degrees from the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand.

To his wife Pam, his children and grandchildren and his 92 year old mother, we extend our deepest sympathy.”

*Chief Justice I Mahomed*

“I first met John Didcott at a students’ congress in Cape Town in July of 1953. I last saw him at a hospital in Durban in September this year. In the intervening period of more than forty-five years I came, first to respect him as a student leader



*The late Justice John Didcott SC*

with a compelling charisma, then often to fear him as a very powerful adversary at the Bar with a commanding forensic presence in the courts. Still later I came to venerate him as a Judge of rare brilliance and a man of deep commitment. And eventually I came to love him deeply and abidingly as a friend of unsurpassed generosity and loyalty.”

## The late Harry Snitcher QC

*Extracts from a tribute by Jeremy Gauntlett SC, chairman of the Cape Bar*

“Harry’s death makes true the trite saying that an era has ended. He was our very last jury advocate. It was symbolic that he should have given to the Bar his personal memorabilia relating to Beauclerk Upington, because Upington was his great mentor. They were an unlikely duo: the tall, patrician ‘skipper’ and ‘the snitch’ as the mentor liked to refer to the protégé.

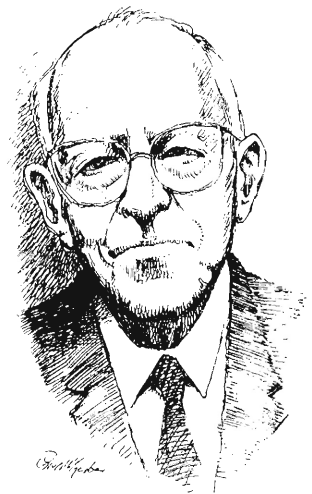
Harry came from poor beginnings: the son of a failed ostrich farmer, born on 10 May 1911 at Uniondale and educated (entirely at Afrikaans country schools) there, at Gouda and Porterville. Thence (after his father’s death) the young Harry and his four brothers and sisters came to Cape Town, where his mother ran a boarding house in Gympie Street to keep the family alive. Harry taught English to foreigners to assist; he was a bright student at SACS, and thereafter at the University of Cape Town. Achieving his LLB degree at the age of twenty, he had to wait until he attained his majority before joining the Bar a year later.

In the best possible sense, he had a unique chameleon quality as an advocate. Perhaps it was his poor beginnings, in a country and essentially Afrikaans environment. He had an intuitive gift in pitching his questions or his argument at his fellow human beings.

It was his origins, too, which undoubtedly led Harry to communism. He served on the Central Committee of the Communist Party of South Africa, and stood for Parliament - in his case, given his short stature, necessarily on a series of soapboxes on the Grand Parade - three times. He lost on each occasion. In 1947 he was tried for sedition, and acquitted. The trial delayed his application for silk by a year, and left him with an abiding memory (he would confide) of the essential terror and loneliness of the criminal dock.

For him virtue did not lie in any party rosette. About his own beliefs he would only say that it was the age when he believed with H G Wells and George Bernard Shaw that a better society could be achieved through communism.

Like his mentor, Upington KC, his political life failed. But it brought him into contact with people like Dr Abdurahman, Cissy Gool and the young intellectuals of Trafalgar High School grouped around the figure of our late colleague Ben Kies. He also built up a magnificent personal collection of South African art. He was always a Cape man, with a fierce attachment to this city, and a great pride in the retainer he held to represent it.”



*The late Harry Snitcher QC*

*The above extracts are published with the permission of the editor of the SA Law Journal.*