

Group 621 reaches its first century

By Jean Meiring

In 2013 Group 621 marks its centenary, making it the oldest group of advocates at the Johannesburg Bar.

On Saturday 24 November 2012, the celebrations commenced with a formal dinner held at The Venue at the World Trade Centre in Johannesburg. The dinner was attended by current members and their partners as well as by a host of former members.

Those included judges Edwin Cameron and Johan Conradie, and Brian Doctor QC, who traveled from London for the occasion. Sadly, former Chief Justice Arthur Chaskalson, who fell ill shortly before the dinner, could not attend and passed away a week later.

The guest of honour and guest speaker was Sir Sydney Kentridge QC, a former (and currently honorary) member of the group. Just two weeks earlier, on his ninetieth birthday, he had argued a matter in the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom.

With characteristic panache, Jeremy Gauntlett SC introduced Sir Sydney. 'We cannot think of a more appropriate way of celebrating the centenary of the group than to celebrate simultaneously the ninetieth birthday of its most illustrious member,' he said.

Sir Sydney joined the Johannesburg Bar and the group in 1949, taking silk in 1965. In 1970, he joined the London Bar, and in 1977 he took silk. Until 1987, he still kept chambers in the group. Besides sitting on appellate courts in Botswana and Jersey and Guernsey, Sir Sydney spent two stints on the first Constitutional Court.

But it is as an advocate that he came to be reckoned as a giant and – in Gauntlett SC's words – straddled two countries, living through the extraordinary upheaval and oppression of the apartheid era and then practising in England in the 1980s as that jurisdiction's public law underwent a notable flowering.

Gauntlett SC proceeded to describe Sir Sydney's 'incomparable grouping of gifts as an advocate.' Besides his ample verbal and forensic skills, he has 'remarkable cunning, a predatory eye, a sense for the jugular, a capacity to strike.'

Sir Sydney rose and, for a half hour, presented a master class in engaging an

audience without notes and without a single halting 'um.'

'When I came to Group 621,' he said, 'it was a time of giants. We had the most wonderful leaders. Norman Rosenberg, Oscar Rathouse, Harry Hanson, Arthur Williamson, Simon Kuper, Sonny Ettlinger. And, of course, there was Bram Fischer. And it was also a time of great judges in our division: Murray, Ramsbottom.'

'In my time at the English Bar, I've met and heard a great many fine advocates and great judges, but one thing I'm certain of: I had my professional education in Group 621.'

With acerbic humour, Sir Sydney spoke of the difficult times being an advocate under apartheid.

'There seemed to be a deliberate attempt to politicise the Bench. Of course, it didn't always work. Many of the judges who were thought of as political appointments turned out to be very good and very fair judges.'

The three judges, he recalled, who had sat in the Treason Trial (1958-61), including Rumpff, who had never made a secret of his Nationalist sentiments, acquitted all the accused.

'They had a sense of individualism, fairness and justice.'

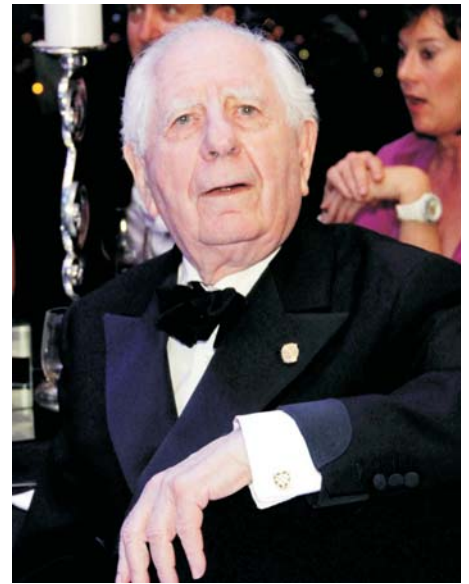
'But many of those appointed had no discernible qualification for the Bench other than their political affiliation. Their claims to judicial promotion had up to that time completely escaped the notice of our profession. When one came up before them, it was sometimes very uphill indeed.'

Sir Sydney noted the challenges faced in today's South Africa, adding that he'd never considered the goals of merit and diversity on the Bench were in any sense in conflict with one another.

'In a country, which is based on the rule of law such as this country,' he stated, 'there is nothing more essential than to have a competent and above all independent judiciary.'

Those present on the twentieth floor of the World Trade Centre, with diminutive Johannesburg far below, knew they'd been in the presence of greatness.

Sir Sydney received a rousing standing ovation.



Sir Sydney Kentridge was the guest of honour and guest speaker at Group 621's centenary dinner.

Advocates Group 621

Advocates Group 621 came into being in 1913. Then, the Johannesburg Bar was still small and loosely organised. At its inception, like most of the Bar, it was housed in Sauer's Buildings in Loveday Street in central Johannesburg.

Colonel Charles Frampton Stallard led the group until 1924. He had been called to the Bar in London in 1895 and, after fighting in the Anglo-Boer War, joined the fledgling Johannesburg Bar in 1902. From 1920 to 1924 he served as chairman of the Johannesburg Bar Council, before becoming the Minister of Mines in the Smuts government.

On 4 June 1971 Stallard celebrated his own centenary, an occasion marked by a formal address by the Johannesburg Bar Council (one of the signatories of which was one Sydney Kentridge).

Shortly before the mantle fell on the next leader Philip Millin KC, the group moved to Corporation Building in Rissik Street. Millin KC headed the group until he was elevated to the bench in 1937.

Famously on 15 April 1952 Millin KC died in court in Johannesburg midway through a eulogy to WA Currie, another member of the group who had passed away.

In the late 1930s, the group moved to Empire Building and then to His Majesty's Building. In 1961, it moved to the sixth floor in Innes Chambers.

After Millin KC, the task of leading the group fell successively to Oscar Rathouse KC, Norman Rosenberg KC and Rex Welsh QC.



Sasa Fako and Mmusi Seape having a ball at the Group 621 centenary dinner.



Schalk Burger SC, guest of honour and guest speaker Sir Sydney Kentridge, Judge Edwin Cameron, Peter Solomon SC, Jeremy Gauntlett SC and Judge Conradie.

In 1994, Clive Cohen SC took over the helm, a role he fulfilled until 2006. Since then, the role of group leader has been rotated among the senior silks. Willem van der Linde SC, Arnold Subel SC and currently, Alistair Franklin SC, have led the group.

In 1997, as part of a general trend at the Johannesburg Bar, the group moved from its position directly opposite what is now the South Gauteng High Court. This move was, like for the rest of the Bar, a dramatic one. In Sandton, it honoured its illustrious former leader who had passed away three years earlier by naming its new home Rex Welsh House.

Advocates Group 621 is proud to count among its alumni many eminent silks and judges, also of the Supreme Court of Appeal and the Constitutional Court. Among its current members are some of the most accomplished advocates practising in South Africa today.

But no-one associated with the group has managed to pull off a feat quite like that of Harold Kronson, who served as the group's clerk or administrator to the group for a staggering seventy-four years. In his welcoming speech at the centenary dinner, Franklin SC quite aptly described Kronson's as 'an unprecedented achievement in the annals of employment endurance.'

In the November 1995 edition of *Consultus*, the forerunner of *Advocate*, Kronson, then still at the group, wrote:

'I was 17 and working in a country store in the small Free State town of Rosendal when I read in a three-day old copy of *The Star* that a group of advocates in Johannesburg required a male shorthand writer/bookkeeper. I left immediately for Johannesburg and two days later I was interviewed by Stallard KC. On 1 July 1922, I started work.'

A century worth of lever-arch files later, Group 621 endeavours to continue playing a central role in South African justice. **A**

Johannesburg Bar's support for judicial education

By Les Morison SC

The South Gauteng Bar Council's initiative to support the South African Judicial Education Institute took a further step forward on 24 January 2013 at a meeting of the curriculum committee of the council.

Chaired by retired Constitutional Court Justice Yvonne Mokgoro, and having Supreme Court Justice of Appeal Carol Lewis on the curriculum committee, it discussed with the writer:

- convening a conference in early 2014

on the topic of judicial education;

- a collation of the conference papers as a loose-leaf publication to be regularly updated;
- a focus on training acting judges in the High Court.

A decision from General Council of the South African Institute of Judicial Education is to be made on the Johannesburg Bar's initiative in early March and, if all goes well, a working committee compri-

sing representatives of the Bar, the academics, including a person with experience in collation and editing of available materials, a representative of the attorneys' profession, the magistracy and the Bench would be the next step. The role of the Johannesburg Bar in this initiative is to provide energy, ideas and labour via volunteers. Those interested in volunteering to assist in this initiative are requested to contact the writer at lmorison@law.co.za. **A**