Gerald Shaw

5 May 1934 - 2 June 2026

(Content supplied by the Shaw family)

Gerald Shaw made a significant contribution to South Africa's political history, largely through his influential weekly Political Survey column, published in the Cape Times from 1966 to 1996. As a journalist, he was a witness to troubled times, of state-sponsored torture and destabilisation. He was brave and resolute in taking on these scourges in his journalistic writing. He also wrote extensively about a dawn of new hope during the first years of the new democratic South Africa.

Gerald Shaw grew up in Pretoria in the 1930s. As a child, he read Boys' Own Journal under the covers at night by torchlight, the beginnings of a lifelong love of reading. He thrilled to the wartime newsreels and movies at the local cinema. He was educated by the Christian brothers, where he received many-a-strapping for being an 'absent-minded professor'.

Being a reporter was a lifelong ambition. He spent two years as a student in political science and psychology at the University of Pretoria, when a junior reporter role became available at the Pretoria News. He joined the paper on 22 January 1954 and completed his degree part-time over the following two years. He was first given the crime beat and was worried he would not get through his probation, until he was able to write about the Fountains Valley panga-man, who preyed on trysting couples in parked cars.

In 1957 he took a year's long leave and travelled to England where he joined the Kentish Times. After a week on staff the editor called Gerald in and handed him the entire week's articles for the paper and asked him to 'knock them into shape', which then became routine during his time there. He later jumped at the chance to join the Argus London Office, preparing overnight cables to South Africa to serve The Star and Cape Argus.

After his year's leave was up he was given the option of returning to The Pretoria News or moving to Cape Town to the Cape Argus. He chose Cape Town, and after

some time with the Argus he moved across to the Cape Times, where his political reporting career took shape via the parliamentary beat, ultimately leading to his weekly Political Survey Column.

The most shocking event Gerald witnessed in Parliament was the assassination of Hendrik Verwoerd by parliamentary messenger Dimitri Tsafendas. Gerald had just ordered a hamburger and pot of tea from Tsafendas and had been given too much change. A few moments later he watched horrified as Tsafendas plunged a knife repeatedly into the prime minister on the assembly room floor. Gerald noted the time on the clock, which was always kept five minutes fast, and rushed to phone the news editor, who laughed and put the phone down on him. Gerald called back immediately and was taken seriously this time.

Trevor Manuel, in his review of Gerald's 2007 journalistic memoir Believe in Miracles, refers to an "extraordinary 'perch of privilege' of being in the right place at right time", which referred to this and many other incidents and turning points in the country's history that Gerald was first-hand witness to.

His column, which kept people informed about what was actually happening despite tight restrictions on media, was also featured in the Natal Witness for many years. As Assistant Editor, Gerald also wrote many of the leading articles or editorials for the paper in that period, strongly criticising the National Party regime's actions inside and outside the country, and speaking out in favour of a negotiated settlement. Editors Victor Norton and Tony Heard gave him a free hand in the columns, while the Board of Directors were often unhappy with the views expressed.

Heard was a close collaborator and colleague of Gerald's at The Cape Times for many years, a close relationship that continued after Heard's firing after his 1985 interview with Oliver Tambo was published. Retired Judge Ian Farlam, then senior counsel, gave pro bono advice to Gerald and Tony on apartheid legislation and regulations. Because of these measures, alert readers would at times have to read between the lines in the paper to understand what was going on.

Gerald's attitudes were informed by the social teaching of the Catholic Church and inspired by Archbishop Denis Hurley's insistence on human rights and human

dignity. The South African brand of liberalism he admired was concerned with human rights and social justice and was emphatically opposed to racial discrimination.

His political column tracked the rise of the progressives and the rise of the black consciousness movement, the rise of the militarists, armed resistance, and the dawn of the New South Africa. Gerald was there on 2 February 1990, when a large crowd gathered in Greenmarket Square in anticipation of FW de Klerk's speech.

A key theme of the Political Survey column was that nationalism begets nationalism. He wrote of the destabilisation of neighbouring states, Angola, Zimbabwe and Mozambique. He wrote of the detention laws and death squads. He wrote of the armed resistance to apartheid by the ANC and others. He covered the incomplete Truth and Reconciliation and a new democratic order. The column was unbiased and measured in tone but advocated strongly for human rights and social justice.

During the PW Botha era, Gerald was attending the annual reception given by the Press Gallery correspondents for MPs, members of Cabinet, civil servants, and other honoured guests, in the historic dining room of the old House of Assembly. PW Botha came striding towards Gerald and waved his index finger in his face and shouted, "I'll get you. I'll get you… If it takes me twenty years, I'll get you."

Gerald Shaw's Political Survey column had recently bemoaned the "Sinking Standards in Public Life".

Gerald was invited by governments to visit and to write about his experiences there. One of those occasions of right place at right time was an extraordinary gathering at Marly-le-Roi in Paris in 1989.

It was during this visit that Thabo Mbeki said to Gerald "We are coming home."

Again, in the right place at the right time, Gerald was present when the Women's March took place in 1956. In the famous photograph depicting Rahima Moosa, Lilian Ngoyi, Helen Joseph, and Sophia Williams-De Bruyn, he can be seen in the background in a suit and dark glasses, with a reporter's notebook in hand. Gerald was a witness to and chronicler of our history as it unfolded.

Another famous event he attended, after his move to Cape Town, was the march of 30 000 people led by a young Phillip Kgosana in March 1960, as part of the PAC's non-violent protest against the pass laws. Gerald walked with the crowd as it was led in perfect order past Rondebosch Common through Mowbray and onto De Waal Drive (now named Phillip Kgosana) into town, where Kgosana had been promised an interview with the Minister of Justice. He was instead arrested at Caledon Square.

Gerald was full of praise for the women of the Black Sash, particularly their advice office, which advised victims of apartheid laws, and their investigations into disappearances of anti-apartheid leaders. He also admired Helen Suzman, at times the lone progressive voice in Parliament.

The role of BJ Vorster and PW Botha in violent repression of anti-apartheid dissent, including 90-day detention legislation, secrets, lies and death squads, was covered by Gerald in detail in his column and in editorials. Political murders were rife. The Security Police were a law unto themselves. Political violence continued into the 1990s, it was apparent that some in the country were determined to undermine the passage to a negotiated settlement.

Gerald tracked the Information scandal, which PW Botha used for his own ends. He also wrote about the incomplete Truth and Reconciliation Commission, particularly the failure of many to tell the full truth about and atone for the apartheid past.

He referred to the Mandela era as a time of miracles, and he regarded Nelson Mandela as a legend and moral giant. Though retired from the Cape Times, Gerald was present at the second inauguration of President Thabo Mbeki in 2004, when the crowd cheered President Robert Mugabe. Identity was a recurring theme in the Political Survey column. Gerald argued that the emergence of a non-racial South African identity was hampered by the persistence of ethnic and racial identities.

Gerald had several books published, including "Some Beginnings", a history of early Cape Times editors, for his Honours degree. He edited "The Garrett Papers" published by the Van Riebeeck Society, for his Master's degree, which was

obtained ‘cum laude’. He also wrote An Informal History of the Cape Times and a Family Chronicle, which traced the Shaw family’s Irish and English roots. “Believe in Miracles: South Africa from Malan to Mandela - and the Mbeki Era - a reporter’s story”, was published in 2007, a personal account of his political journalism career and the events that shaped it.

He was an author, journalist, commentator, family man, appreciator of nature and literature, and he loved visiting the Kruger National Park. Everyone wanted to be on his team for Trivial Pursuit. His wife Lou Shaw, an active and passionate Black Sash member, and his four children Robert, David, Maryann and Helen, were fortunate to enjoy his company in various ages and stages during his 92 years. He was able to see his seven grandchildren growing up.

In later life Gerald suffered from dementia. He died peacefully at home in Rondebosch on 2 June.

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As we get the chance to, we will add images for use or reference here:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1kb3VIogIcDAihEaZ6OaDGo-DHV5q2bVz?usp=sharing

For further information, if necessary, contact his daughter, Maryann Shaw
Call 0834194235 or email maryann@maryannshawcommunications.co.za

Details regarding any services for Gerald are yet to be finalised and will be communicated. The date will most likely be Saturday 20 June.

Photo captions:

1. Gerald Shaw and Tony Heard, colleagues at the Cape Times, at work at Newspaper house, probably circa 1960s or ‘70s.
   Image credit: Supplied

2. Gerald Shaw, circa 1998
   Image credit: Maryann Shaw