

State turned its back on Struggle hero

By Siyavuya Mzantsi

Cape Times editorial

We dedicate this editorial to the late Struggle icon, Elizabeth van der Heyden, fondly known as Ma Betty.

The only female political prisoner who served a full 10-year prison detention, she was the last surviving member of the Cape Peninsula Students Union, having fought alongside comrades like Neville Alexander, Frank van der Horst and Dulcie September.

Her passing this week, just days before she could celebrate her 89th birthday in September, ends Women's Month in a sombre mood.

Not many were aware of the existence of this giant in our Struggle until earlier this month when we interviewed her as part of our women's month coverage.

As we reported, her political history is a whisper in the background despite her resilience during these years, and indeed her story should be echoing through the pages of South African history books.

While she, and many others of her generation, ensured that South Africa became a democracy, Ma Betty, who was bedridden, spent most of her latter years engaged in a different struggle – to secure government financial assistance.

She was met with a bureaucratic wall and red tape.

In her own words, the former teacher told us: "The financial burden is painful. One would like to have no burdens at all, especially financially. I need healthcare. I used to be on their (government) health schemes but that assistance is no longer available to me – my health is not being catered for."

A caring government would not have taken comfort in a person of Ma Betty's calibre pleading for state assistance.

If anything, Ma Betty should have spent her last days reflecting on the journey the country has made, especially with advancing women's and children's rights.

The democratic government she gallantly fought for and nearly paid the ultimate price, turned its back when it was time to reward her for her sacrifices.

The government, in particular the ANC, should hang its head in shame for having failed Ma Betty while she was alive.

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