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Born in 1948, Leon Louw grew up in an Afrikaner home and then became a communist anti-apartheid activist. Louw then became a libertarian, or classically liberal. Louw's work with important organisations such as the Free Market Foundation, and his many publications allowed for free-market ideas to be incorporated in political discussion in South Africa.

### Leon Louw

Leon Louw is a free-market liberal political and economic analyst in South Africa. Louw was a pro-market anti-apartheid activist whose writings influenced the makings of South Africa's new government and constitution. He began fighting apartheid by getting involved with the [African National Congress](#) and communist activists. When he witnessed the arrest of a woman selling fruit on the grounds that Africans could not sell products in the streets, Louw experienced an ideological conversion from communism to classical liberalism. Liberalism is a philosophy that argues for a limited government and laissez-faire economic policy in order to achieve individual freedom under the rule of law and private property. He actively participated in several organisations that promote economic freedom, and as a lawyer, Louw defended street vendors in Johannesburg that were harassed by the government. He continues to write, speak and influence policy today, always with the goal of prosperity for small business and black economic opportunity in South Africa.

Leon Louw was born in Krugersdorp in 1948. His mother died during his infancy, so during his early childhood he went to Potchefstroom to be raised by relatives. Later, when his father got remarried, Louw moved to Johannesburg where he lived on a small farm. Louw describes his childhood as 'modest and conservative' (Louw 2013). When he went to study law

at the University of Witwatersrand, he realized that he was against apartheid, not for deep philosophical reasons, but emotional and compassionate ones. Louw explained that back then, the views on apartheid were binary, either you were in favor of it and you liked the National Party, and if you were against apartheid, you were “leftist” and therefore, socialist or communist. As a self prescribed ‘generalist and purist,’ he became ‘a radical, revolutionary communist’ (Louw 2013). Louw entered young adulthood in the mid to late 60s, a few years after the ANC and most liberation organisations were banned. In his teens, he witnessed the [Rivonia Trial](#), where [Walter Sisulu](#), [Nelson Mandela](#) and others were sentenced to life in prison. In addition to being banned, the organization was crippled by the loss of many of their leaders. Even though Louw strongly opposed apartheid, he never joined any political or liberation groups. He did courier work for the ANC, facilitating communications between the exiled branches of the organisation and the banned underground movement in South Africa.

Despite having grown up in an Afrikaner home, surrounded by friends and family that supported apartheid and the National Party, Louw was never rejected by them for his communist beliefs. He said that they always accepted him and expected his anti-apartheid activism to be just a rebellious phase in his youth. They had many heated arguments, yet Louw stuck to his communist views and never outgrew his resistance to government controls.

Though soon Louw started to see inconsistencies between his beliefs and communist ideologies. When he saw street vendors getting chased off the streets and treated like pests or garbage, he realized that he believed those people had a right to do business, and in a socialist/communist system, they would not. He said it took him ‘an embarrassingly long’ time for him to realize how wrong he was about communism (Louw 2013). In recent newspaper editorial, Louw discusses how this ideological shift came to be. The article entitled, ‘The Poor

Are Punished For Trying to Make a Living,’ Louw tell the reader of Granny Moyo, who was an 80-year-old woman that was killed when she hit her head on the side of a police van. She was being arrested for selling sweets. Much like this story, Louw tells us of Maria, who sold fruit outside of the building where he was a clerk in the 1960s. One day when he was buying fruit from her, two policemen spotted her and chased her down the street. One policeman kicked over her basket, spilling her money and fruit into the street. The other caught her and grabbed her so tightly that she cried out in pain. He related his reaction, ‘I abandoned my daily routine and went to the police headquarters to fight for her liberty...those were the darkest apartheid days, when more was done to clear vendors than litter.’ (Louw 2013).



Street vendor selling sweets to schoolchildren  
Soweto, Johannesburg, South Africa. 1985.  
Photograph by Santu Mofokeng. Permission: [Africa Media Online](#)

In Santu Mofokeng’s photograph above, there is a woman selling sweets on the side of the road who made her living similarly to Granny Moyo and Maria. These are the people that Louw describes as ‘survivalists’, whose last option is to become a street vendor in a system that sets black up for failure and harassment (Louw, 2013). To Louw, black economic empowerment was a solution to apartheid. He believed that economic freedom was a fundamental right that should be fought for like other personal liberties. This led him to become involved with and even

start organisations, write books and articles, and use his occupation as lawyer, in order to defend the street vendors in Johannesburg that were being deprived of their right to engage in business.

He became a part of a small list of anti-apartheid free market liberals. This crowd was dwarfed by the larger and more popular parties in the anti-apartheid movement that were not classically liberal, like the ANC. Louw said, ‘I was a radical communist revolutionary mainly because that’s what opponents of apartheid were presumed to be. I became converted to capitalism mainly by the literature of Ayn Rand and Robert Heinlein, and discovered people like Hayek and Friedman, and Mises and Rothbard, and eventually became a purist libertarian’ (Wile 2011). The switch to classical liberalism, also known as libertarianism, was the result of Louw’s experiences with the street vendors as well as the literature with which he surrounded himself. While there are many differences between communism and libertarianism, he remained an opponent of apartheid. Louw once said in an interview, ‘People often say that’s a big change, from being communist to a libertarian, but as a communist, I was for the withering of the state and I still am.’ (Wile 2011). South Africans held many different views when it came to fighting apartheid. Liberal, communist, Africanist, and many others were just a few reasons that people used. Amidst this large and eclectic group, as a free-market liberal, Louw became a part of a distinct minority in the opposition to apartheid.

Louw became involved in the National African Federated Chamber of Commerce and Industry ([NAFCOC](#)), during the late 1960s when it was still very small. As one of the groups few white members, Louw watched the membership swell in size to thousands of people, and contributed to their work ‘to develop and promote economic growth amongst existing and new businesses’ (The National African Federated Chamber of Commerce and Industry). NAFCOC’s work to empower blacks in the economy resulted in the first black-owned bank, the [African](#)

[Bank](#). Later, Louw watched many of NAFCOOC's members become very successful businessmen because of increases in economic freedom in South Africa facilitated by NAFCOOC's work. Louw and NAFCOOC have expressed that their goal is to achieve economic liberty for everyone. And during apartheid, Indians, Coloureds, and especially Africans had that right taken away from them. Louw said that his view on skin color is much like his view on eye color or hair color. He used the example of brown-eyed people: if all brown-eyed people were refused their right to participate in the economy, then he would be compelled to help the brown-eyed people. But this does not make him a proponent of only brown-eyed people; Louw said he 'is just a proponent of people' (Louw 2013).

In the mid to late 1980s, many South Africans could feel that the end of apartheid was near. South Africans and the international community had hopes and ideas for the future of the country. Many people called for a redistribution of wealth in hopes of achieving equality for people of all races. Louw and his wife, Frances Kendall, responded to these views, and published *South Africa: The Solution* (International title: *After Apartheid: The Solution for South Africa*) in 1986, and the follow up book, *Let the People Govern* in 1989. The book was a best seller in South Africa, and then an international version was published for countries like the United States and Canada. These books resulted in three Nobel Peace Prize nominations for Louw and Kendall (Who's Who, 2013). In *South Africa: the Solution*, Louw and Kendall discuss the numerous political groups that were fighting for, or resisting, changes to the apartheid system. They point out that while it was clear what the political parties oppose, very few were clear on their vision for a post-apartheid South Africa. One reviewer of the first book claimed Louw and Kendall captured the attention of many with their 'radical, but realistic, proposal for a new kind of constitution' (Greaves 1987). In addition to the example constitution that Louw and Kendall put

towards the end of the book, they explain the structure of government that they see as the solution to South Africa's problems, as the title suggests.

Louw and Kendall saw the apartheid system as one of "white capitalism, black socialism." They argued that whites could thrive in a somewhat capitalist system, where they were able to participate and compete in the economy. Meanwhile, blacks suffered from apartheid regulations that made their entire world owned and controlled by the government, and therefore, socialist. In a review, Louw and Kendall's ideas were summarized to say, 'In the past, when blacks were free to embark on enterprises as they chose, their accomplishments were impressive that the white minority strove purposively to restrict their efforts. And then the whites made sure that the central government remained under their control' (Greaves 1987). Because of this, Louw and Kendall argued that the solution is not to continue socialism, government intervention and control, but to have direct democracy and follow a Swiss-like system of cantons, similar to states, thus decentralizing the government's power.

The books received both laudatory and critical attention from many South Africans and an international audience as well. When reviewed in *The Freeman*, Louw and Kendall were praised for their proposal that was 'a radical one, but is a reasonable one which should appeal to reasonable men and women...Certainly, any reasonable alternative that offers hope for reducing the strife in South Africa is well worth considering' (Greaves 1987). On the other hand, in the *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, Heribert Adams described Louw and Kendall's solution as naïve, and accused them of disregarding the consequences of their plan. 'This move away from "ethnic socialism" to classical laissez-faire liberalism would substitute racial advantages with colour-blind class privileges' (Adams 1988). Even though their Swiss canton system was not adopted as the new form of government after apartheid, 'many of the authors specific proposals

for the post-apartheid constitution have been incorporated in South Africa's new constitution, despite having been almost uniformly dismissed at the time of publication' (African Heritage). Louw and Kendall's publication was a best seller, but not necessarily received well by all that purchased the book. With that being said, the books still made an impact on post-apartheid South Africa because of the Free Market Foundation that aided the research and publications, and represented free-market liberals in South Africa.

Back in 1975, Louw co-founded the Free Market Foundation (FMF) to advocate human rights and democracy derived from classically liberal doctrines, and 'to counter the steadily increasing intervention in the economy by the government of the time' (Free Market Foundation). The Free Market Foundation was involved in [negotiations on South Africa's constitution](#) and its submissions to the Convention for a Democratic South Africa ([CODESA](#)) and the Parliamentary constitutional committees led to the inclusion of property rights in the Bill of Rights (Free Market Foundation). Louw was a part of [the Constitutional Assembly](#), made up of representatives of all major political parties and liberation groups to discuss the content of South Africa's new constitution. During the process, he was on a theme committee and two subcommittees. The Free Market Foundation's ideas are reflected in an addition to the limitation clause, which states that rights can only be limited when it is 'justifiable in an open and democratic society.' Their suggestions also helped establish the administrative justice clause (33 in the Bill of Rights), and the freedom of trade clause (22 in the Bill of Rights), and incorporating rule of law as a founding provision listed in the beginning of the [constitution](#) (Free Market Foundation). While many of the political parties involved in the negotiations did not have aligning views with the Free Market Foundation, it managed to make significant contributions to South Africa's constitution.

Today, Leon Louw is 'known for his accurate forecasts' because many of his predictions about decisions made at the end of apartheid have come true (Wile 2011). Because of this, he is highly sought after for advice and counsel by many international governments from the regional to national level. Louw has spoken in 30 countries, and he has lectured and debated at all 23 of South Africa's universities. Louw 'networks regularly with all major political parties and leaders in South Africa and is on first name terms with many key players across the spectrum' (African Heritage). He said in an interview, 'interestingly, even Winnie Mandela, considered far left, has worked closely with us over the years, particularly because of our struggle for the rights of black people.' Even after his ideological shift, Louw still could collaborate with leaders that he worked with when he was a communist (Wile 2011). Outside of South Africa, Louw has been consulted by many African and Asian governments and given assistance to officials and advisors in governments all over the globe.

However, Louw still tries to focus on grassroots efforts similar to his activism against apartheid. The Free Market Foundation is still trying to promote personal, economic, and press freedom, as it was during the apartheid era. It now states that 'Due to current circumstances in the country, in some unfortunate respects similar to those of the 1970's, the Foundation has restructured once again in order to better the issues that confront the country' (Free Market Foundation). The FMF is still interested in improving South Africa and does not see its mission, to achieve progress through freedom, as complete with the end of apartheid.

Even now, Louw openly criticizes the South African government for the sake of economic freedom, for all races and all businesses. In an article he states, 'the challenge to the business community in the new millennium...is to fight a new battle for freedom of enterprise against new threats that have the advantage of being protected by the tyranny of political



correctness and cosmic virtue’ (Louw 2000). In an interview, Louw acknowledges that ‘Strangely enough, I still do much of the same work, still working against laws that discriminate viciously against black South Africans, and equally evil new laws against whites’ (Wile 2011). His goals and opinions have not changed much with the end of apartheid, and it is clear that Louw still sees that his struggle has not ended.

Louw feels that his work in South Africa is not done. During apartheid, Louw was trying to empower those who were oppressed under the system, and unable to contribute to the economy. As a lawyer, he defended the street vendors that were terrorized for selling sweets and fruit, because he felt that it was wrong to keep people from conducting business. This sparked his work with important organisations, his publications and lectures allowed for free market principles to be included in political conversation and South Africa’s constitution and legislation. As the Executive Director of the Free Market Foundation, Louw continues to impact the country’s politics with the articles published on the FMF website and its consultation of many governments and leaders abroad and in South Africa.



Leon Louw  
South Africa  
Permission: Leon Louw/FMF/Gail Day

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