Joel Goodman Joffe

Joel Goodman Joffe was born on 12 May 1932. He is a graduate of this university, where he was awarded the Bachelor of Commerce degree in 1952 and Bachelor of Laws degree in 1955.

During his varied and illustrious career, Lord Joffe has gained world prominence as international chairman of Oxfam and as the founder of the JG and VL Joffe Charitable Trust (a Top 300 trust) but his first claim to distinction was his work as a human rights lawyer in Johannesburg.

After graduating from Wits, Joel Joffe qualified as an attorney and later began to practise as an advocate at the Johannesburg Bar. Intending to emigrate, he had applied for entry to Australia, but when, in 1963, attorney James Kantor was arrested, Joel Joffe agreed to take over his practice. Persuaded to become the defence attorney in the impending Rivonia Trial, in which several leaders of the ANC, including Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Ahmed Kathrada were charged with treason, he employed his redoubtable legal skills, his tenacity, and his formidable capacity for work to great effect. His contribution to defending and supporting the accused and averting the imposition of the death penalty is detailed in his book, *The Rivonia Story*.

Throughout the stressful and eventful months of the trial, Joffe took extraordinary care not only of the accused but of their families, to whom his support and personal generosity was unstinting. After the Rivonia Trial, Joffe defended a large number of others accused of political offences. His passport was confiscated and he was subjected to police harassment. Eventually he was forced to emigrate to England on an “exit permit”. On arriving in London, he secured a position at Abbey Life Assurance, a public company in which two other distinguished Wits law graduates, Sir Sydney Lipworth and Sir Mark Weinberg, had become significant figures. In 1971 he became a Founder Director, the Joint Managing Director, and finally Deputy Chair of Allied Dunbar Assurance (previously Hambro Life Assurance).

Lord Joffe left Allied Dunbar in 1991, and from 1992 campaigned to protect consumers from the excesses of the financial service industry. His campaign is recognised as having made a significant impact on consumer protection in the United Kingdom.

His contribution to the public good in South Africa, the United Kingdom and the resource-poor world has been enormous. In 1974, he became the Chairman of Thamesdown Voluntary Services Council and Chairman of the Lyddington Bridge Association, which ran homes for former offenders in the Thamesdown area. He was also the founding Trustee of the Thamesdown Community Trust. For a number of years he was an active Samaritan. He was deeply involved in the provision of public health services in the United Kingdom, and was Chairman of the Swindon Health Authority and of the Swindon and Marlborough National Health Trust.

Lord Joffe is a founder member and trustee of a wide range of charitable organisations in the United Kingdom, but most significantly, since 1979 he has been involved in the leadership of international Oxfam – one the world’s premier charities. He became a Trustee in 1979 and thereafter was Honorary Secretary, then Chairman of the Executive Committee. Since 1995, he has been the International Chairman of Oxfam.

He has maintained his close association with South Africa throughout his residence abroad and has been an unceasingly generous source of material support to political prisoners and their families. His engagement with South Africa intensified after democratic transition in 1994. In 1997-98 he was special advisor to the former Minister of Transport, Mr Mac Maharaj. He has been a major benefactor of the Wits Law School Endowment Appeal, and contributed a founding donation to the establishment of a Chair in memory of Bram Fischer.

An extremely diffident man, Joel Joffe has avoided self-advancement and has turned down a number of honours which it was sought to bestow on him in recognition of his signal public interest work. In 1995, however, he accepted an honorary doctorate from The Open University, and in 2000 he was elevated to the peerage in the Queen’s New Year’s Honours List – an honour which, in his capacity as a member of the House of Lords, will assist him in promoting the public and international philanthropic principles to which he has devoted most of his life.

Joel Joffe is one of the University’s most distinguished law graduates. He has dedicated his life to the courageous advancement of human rights and the betterment of his fellow humans, particularly in the resource-poor world. In Steven Clingman’s biography of Bram Fischer, Constitutional Court President Arthur Chaskalson is quoted as describing Joel Joffe as a man of “near saintly qualities”. Saints have always had a secular impact and Lord Joffe’s secular impact has been enormous.

It is with great pride and pleasure that the University confers upon Joel Goodman Joffe the degree of Doctor of Laws *honoris causa*.