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# Robert 'Bob' Alexander Pullen (1939–2025): A legacy of institutional leadership, technical excellence and dedicated service

On 27 May 2025, South Africa's engineering fraternity lost one of its most influential and steadfast pillars — Robert 'Bob' Alexander Pullen. His passing leaves a legacy of institutional leadership, technical excellence and dedicated service to the built environment and the communities it supports.

Bob Pullen was born on 2 December 1939 in Benoni and spent his formative years in Rustenburg, where he matriculated in 1957. He went on to graduate from the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits) in 1963 – a milestone that would mark the beginning of a lifelong journey of scholarship, practice and service. He completed his MSc(Eng) degree under Prof. DC Midgley. In 1964, he took a position as research engineer in the Hydrological Research Unit at Wits. In 1969, he joined the Department of Water Affairs in the Planning Division. He joined Steffen Robertson & Kisten in 1982. Over the years, he would come to be recognised not only as a brilliant civil engineer, but as a statesman of the profession, bridging technical, regulatory and institutional needs with vision and integrity.

## Professional journey and contributions

From the early stages of his career, Bob positioned himself in roles that spanned technical engineering, policy, regulation and professional governance. As a consulting engineer, his expertise lay primarily in water resource evaluation and development, hydraulic engineering, and environmental and institutional management – disciplines that demand not only technical skill but the capacity to see systems, impacts and long-term sustainability intimately entwined.

One of his signature contributions was his involvement in the editorial and technical work behind the 1986 Department of Water Affairs document 'Management of the Water Resources of the RSA', colloquially regarded as South Africa's 'water bible'. In that role, he helped shape national policy frameworks on water management that would endure for decades. He also played a central part in investigations of major floods, the development of national flood management policy, and in legislating disaster and environmental planning in South Africa.

This technical foundation and his reputation for fairness and consensus-building naturally led to roles of governance and professional regulation. He served on the Council of the South African Institution of Civil Engineering (SAICE) from 1972 until 1997, and in 1989 he was elected President of SAICE.

However, his most enduring institutional impact may have been at the Engineering Council of South Africa (ECSA). Elected unanimously, Bob served three terms as President from 1994 to 2006 and continued as Vice-President until 2008. Under his guidance, ECSA navigated a period of transition in South Africa's constitutional order, culminating in the promulgation of the seven Built Environment Professions Acts in 2001 – legislation that harmonised the regulatory framework for engineering and allied professions in the new democracy.

In recognition of his service, Bob was named an Honorary Fellow of SAICE and was awarded a Gold Medal by Wits University (through its alumni/honorary degree citations).

In 2009, Bob was honoured with the National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF) Award (Category C) for his contributions outside pure research, in policy, regulation and professional practice – underscoring his impact beyond academia into the broader science, engineering and innovation community.

His influence extended beyond national boundaries. He served as past President of the South African Academy of Engineering (SAAE), and was, for many years, Chair and champion of ECSA's role in transforming South African professional regulation.

## Leadership, philosophy and legacy

Bob Pullen's professional ethos balanced technical depth with institutional wisdom and a strong moral compass. The late Dawie Botha, SAICE's Executive Director, said in 2014, that Bob warned against the commodification of professionals – the risk that engineers might be judged by the bottom line rather than the excellence and integrity of their service.

His knack for diplomacy, fairness and consensus – traits often praised by his peers – allowed him to navigate contested policy landscapes and bring multiple stakeholders into alignment.

Bob was also ahead of his time in embracing the overlap between the environment and engineering. Even before 'sustainability' became a buzzword, he promoted the idea that environmental systems must be integrated into engineering decisions and that the built environment must co-exist responsibly with nature.

His service extended to mentorship, institutional capacity-building and nurturing the next generations of engineers. Whether in SAICE's institutional programmes, ECSA's regulatory evolution, or academia's links to practice, Bob was a bridge-builder. He served as a member of the SAICE Council from 1972 to 1997, was elected Honorary Fellow in 1996, and awarded SAICE's prestigious Gold Medal in 2001.

His retirement from active governance did not diminish his influence; his counsel remained sought and respected.

## Role in South African Academy of Engineering

Bob Pullen's contributions to the Academy of Engineering were both substantial and sustained.

- He was elected as a Fellow of the SAAE – Independent Civil Engineering Consultant: Water Resources Development, Environmental Impact Management, Programme and Project Management, Mentoring of Young Professionals.
- He served as President of the SAAE for a two-year term covering 2014–2015. Under his Presidency and leadership, the Academy aligned itself with its mission to mobilise the collective wisdom of eminent engineers in South Africa “in the interest of the public, not in the interest of its members.”
- Bob also continued his involvement after his term as President. For example, in later years, he served on the Executive Committee in the capacity of Past President/Treasurer.
- Beyond national work, as part of the SAAE, he participated in international engineering academy networks; for example, Bob represented the SAAE at the Council of Academies of Engineering and Technological Sciences (CAETS) Convocations.

Bob's SAAE role was a senior institutional leadership one – beyond being a member or contributor, he stepped into presidency and governance, helped position the Academy within national and global engineering discourse, and thereby helped shape an institution aimed at engineering and policy advice in South Africa.

## Personal and community life

Behind the titles and achievements was a man of quiet determination, humility and integrity. He was known to be supportive, approachable and generous with his time, especially to younger engineers seeking guidance.

In 1965, Bob married Dee Lawrence in Johannesburg; they had five children: three daughters and twin boys. Bob and Dee lived a full life in their community and affairs of their society. Bob was the golf captain of the Pretoria Country Club for a few years and served on the Club Management Committee.

In his later professional years, he served as Senior Specialist in Water Engineering at BKS (Pty) Ltd, contributing to policy, project oversight and mentorship within the firm.

He is survived by his family and the countless professional colleagues and mentees who carry forward his values of service, excellence and ethical stewardship of infrastructure and institutions.



Bob Pullen at the Inauguration of the 122nd President of the South African Institution of Civil Engineering (SAICE) in 2025 (image: SAICE).

## A final reflection

In 1989, as SAICE President, Bob represented a leadership grounded in technical credibility, institutional engagement and a deep appreciation for the public good. Over the ensuing decades, he translated that ethos into architecting the regulatory and institutional scaffolding that would help South Africa's engineering profession adapt, endure and serve more inclusively. He walked in the delicate intersection between engineers, regulators, academia and government, often quietly, often without fanfare – yet always with principle and impact.

His passing invites us to reflect on the attributes that sustain a profession through turbulent times: courage to speak truth to power, generosity to mentor, patience to build consensus, and fidelity to service over self. In honouring his life, the engineering community must also recommit to those ideals.

May his family and loved ones find comfort in shared memories and may the South African civil engineering community – SAICE, ECSA, academia, and beyond – continue to reflect on Bob's legacy and carry forward the responsibility he so faithfully bore.