

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Tony Leon**, *The accidental ambassador. From parliament to Patagonia*. Picador Africa 2013. ISBN: 978-1-77010-241-5 (Soft cover). 281 pages.

Tony Leon is known to many South Africans as the leader of the opposition in the parliament of South Africa between 1999 and 2007. After stepping down from his position as leader of the Democratic Alliance (DA), he authored *On the contrary: Leading the opposition in a democratic South Africa* (2008) as non-fiction work.

In August 2009, Leon was appointed as South African ambassador and plenipotentiary to Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay. This followed informal discussions with Pres. Jacob Zuma after Leon was not enthusiastic about an appointment on the Human Rights Commission. He returned to South Africa from this post in Buenos Aires in late 2012 and from this experience, he authored *The accidental ambassador. From parliament to Patagonia*.

*The accidental ambassador* is indeed a thoughtful book. It basically departs from Leon's retirement from politics at the age of 52 and from the pondering of his father's remark that "you sound like Alexander at the doors of Constantinople: 'I have no more empires to conquer'." Soon after Leon entered into fellowships of the Institute of Politics at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy's School of Government (2007) and the Cato Institute in Washington, DC (2008). An entirely new career opportunity opened up when he entered into public service as South Africa's ambassador to Argentina. From here, he takes the reader from his "job interview" with Pres. Zuma, to his three-week crash course in Pretoria on ambassadorship with two other former cabinet ministers, to his role as diplomat and life in Argentina.

Leon shares his experiences as chief representative of South Africa in a South American state that was one of the leading economies in the world a 100 years ago with an economy four times the wealth of its neighbour, Brazil, but which has shrunk to a quarter of its surging neighbour Brazil in the mean time. In this context, Leon shares many interesting and insightful views on Argentina's current-day politics, which has been built on a 50-year series of military *coups* – a country of which he observed as one with "the appearance of a modern democracy, but it was illusory – the substantive core was either missing or has been hollowed out" (p. 88).

He reflects intelligently on Argentina's political-economic situation, noting that it was illegal during his term of office for economists to provide inflation statistics that contradicted the official and routinely understated inflation. Having been a politician on opposition benches for many years, he unpacks what he describes as "the foul underground rivers of the sulphurous politics and toxic

economics that lurked just below the landscape of contemporary Argentina” (p. 168). Leon also outlines what he views as political and economic similarities between the besieged administrations of PW Botha in South Africa in the 1980s and that of Christina Kirchner in current-day Argentina where the latter led the Argentine economy to bankruptcy, resulting in an extremely unattractive country for foreign investment. This coincided with agencies of the state being wheeled out against the critics of the President and her political direction.

Leon also shares his experiences with the reader by taking the readership behind the South African embassy walls where he discovered that the gold lettering “*Embajada De Sudfricá*/Embassy of South Africa”, marbled walls and mirrored wall in the reception area masked the “functional economy” inside the embassy. In fact, the inside is rather reminiscent of the interior of a provincial hospital and he soon discovered that financial constraints are the order of the day in diplomatic endeavours in his area of responsibility. In this environment, he had to implement South Africa’s (often ambiguous and inconsistent) foreign policy, act as South Africa’s lead representative to three South American countries, find the much needed finances and means to market South Africa, and run the bureaucracy underpinning ambassadorial activities as chief accounting officer of the South African embassy in Buenos Aires.

The reader gets a good idea of what happens inside an embassy. Activities range from preventing drug smuggling from the host country (Argentina) to the country of representation (South Africa) and assisting in drug busts, to cocktail parties in the diplomatic community where socialites hang out week in and week out (which in Leon’s opinion do not really contribute much to the normal course of diplomatic business and which he attempted to avoid), to hosting eminent South African visitors to Argentina and exploring opportunities to market the country.

Leon also shares some interesting matters on his relations with colleagues, such as an unhappy ambassadorial relationship with a “difficult” Ms Dudu Moerane-Khoza who represented South Africa in Chile; the taboo of mentioning the “F word” – meaning Falklands – in diplomatic circles in Argentina; the “soft power” of sports diplomacy in a football mad country at a time when South Africa was hosting the 2010 FIFA World Cup; the frequent hosting of South African sports teams, including Springbok rugby teams; the hosting of several prominent South African politicians, including former President FW de Klerk and a number of cabinet ministers in the Zuma administration; as well as hosting the 2003 Nobel Prize winner, JM Coetzee.

Towards the end of the book, Leon also makes a number of significant remarks about South Africa’s foreign policy. For three years, he states, he was “trying to decode South Africa’s foreign imperatives and make sense of its often erratic implementation” (p. 236). Like many critics of South African foreign policy,

he contends that South Africa has turned a blind eye to violations of fundamental rights in world politics – thereby abandoning the international human rights orientation of South Africa’s foreign policy during the Mandela period. Specifically, in the case of Libya, South Africa voted in favour of the imposition of a so-called no-fly zone by the UN Security Council to protect the citizens of Libya against the dictatorial Muammar Qaddafi, but soon afterwards backtracked on its vote in the Security Council – thereby generating severe criticism against South Africa and its role in international politics. This sparked Leon to convey his personal concern to the Director General of International Relations and Cooperation. However, his letter of concern did not receive a favourable reception back home. Similarly, after South Africa decided to abstain from voting in the Security Council to condemn human rights abuses by the government of Syria against its own population, he decided to send a “politely worded rebuke” in which he noted his concern to the Minister of International Relations and Cooperation, but received no response.

In the final analysis, the reading of Tony Leon’s book takes one back to the introduction of his chapter 5 where he quotes TS Eliot in *The hollow men*: “between the idea and the reality falls the shadow”. A shadow fell over both the major and minor political matters that made up his daily life as “accidental ambassador” in Buenos Aires for three years. Simply put: (foreign) policy and policy implementation are not the same – something that Leon entertainingly uncovers in his book.

In view of the above, Leon’s writings provide a thought-provoking insight in the behind-the-scenes life of his ambassadorship and his diplomatic mission. He is highly articulate, sometimes humorous, and the book is well-written. Moreover, the foibles of diplomatic life as well as his reflections on misgovernance and politics in Argentina and South Africa make interesting reading material. It is strongly recommended for scholars and students as well as those interested in a better understanding of current-day diplomatic practice and South African foreign policy.

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