

MANGOSUTHU BUTHELEZI'S SPEECH

TONY LEON'S BOOK LAUNCH

'On the Contrary'

19th August 2008

I consider it a great privilege to pay tribute to my friend Tony Leon at the launch of his memoir 'On the Contrary: Leading the opposition in a democratic South Africa'. This magisterial tome will long stand as a living and breathing tribute to the quality of Mr Leon's contribution to democracy in South Africa.

Although I have only had the chance to skim through 'On the Contrary', I can see that it contains all the seasoned ingredients we have come to expect from Mr Leon: flair, it is erudite, acerbic, funny, felicitous, often moving, and authoritative in equal measure.

After all, only Mr Leon could get away with titling one of his chapters, Chapter 7, 'Constitutional Palimpsest!' By the way, a palimpsest is a manuscript page, whether from scroll or book that has been written on, scraped off, and used again. And that is certainly not something you can say of Mr Leon's book: 'On the Contrary' is refreshing, original and hits the spot.

Unusually for a political biography, the shades and nuances of Mr Leon's personal life, liberally peppered (excuse the pun) with delicious anecdotes, shine through. Politicians are not one dimensional figures and Mr Leon clearly has a hinterland. Part of Mr Leon's rich and broad hinterland, inherited from his dear parents, is, of course, a love of history - which I share too. And I therefore am sorry to say, Tony, I have picked up a tiny - actually not SO tiny - historical inaccuracy that must be corrected forthwith for the reprints!

It was not King Shaka's armies as your book states, but the armies of my great grandfather, King Cetshwayo, the nephew of King Shaka, who inflicted the worst defeat ever on imperial Britain at the Battle of Isandlwana on the 22nd of January 1879, during the Anglo-Zulu war! King Cetshwayo's regiments were led by my great grandfather, Mnyamana Buthelezi, the Prime Minister to the King. These things are important, Tony! I hope Mr Leon does not mind me pulling his leg a bit.

Returning to Mr Leon's heritage, we read of how, like that doyen of liberalism Helen Suzman, Mr Leon's family:

"Almost like every South African Jewish family's provenance can be traced back to the Pale of Settlement in 1791 by Catherine the Great".

I listened with great interest when the Speaker, at a small meeting, called on Mr Leon to address some remarks to Mr Vladimir Putin on his visit to Cape Town in

2006, that he was the only South African in the room with Putin who shared a Russian grandmother!

But, unlike the modern day descendants of the Czars, Mr Leon has impeccable liberal democrat credentials, which stand foursquare in the tradition of his predecessors Helen Suzman, Colin Elgin and the famous author of 'Cry the Beloved Country', Alan Paton. In the introduction, 'On Golden Notebooks' (x), Mr Leon neatly evaluates the different stances taken by blacks in the struggle. He writes:

"Not every black person, or group, responded in like fashion. Some took up arms, some were imprisoned and brutalised, some were executed, and some went into exile. But some others actively collaborated with, and profited from, the apartheid order. It was a brutal, yet complex, system and the responses to it, in all communities, were by no means uniform".

I would like to state that during the long twilight struggle against apartheid, when the ANC and PAC were exiled, these brave liberals were staunch and fair friends to me in the stance I took against independence for KwaZulu, violence and sanctions. The contribution of these liberal lights, I believe, has still not been properly recorded. As there are many chambers in the human heart, there were many who were pulling madly at the ropes of apartheid.

Wonderfully too, Mr Leon's book ends with something of a vision for the future in an elegant tour de force of the multiple challenges South Africa, the wider region and the world face.

On a personal note, I was always proud to call Tony a friend as well as a political colleague. During fair and tempestuous times, I found Mr Leon to be a reliable ally who never shied away from the role of candid friend. There are not, believe me, enough of those in public life. The tale of intrigue that Mr Leon so grippingly retells about the formation of the DA and the shenanigans of the National Party prosaically bears that out.

We rarely differed on substance and on what needed to be done to take South Africa forward. I am sure that it was his iron determination and inexhaustible ideas and verve which drove the Democratic Alliance's considerable growth since 1994. That is why when Mr Leon resigned, I said that I considered him a first-rate public speaker of the Westminster kind and one of the great parliamentarians of our time.

Mr Leon gained a hard won reputation - amongst friends and political opponents as a staunch defender of our liberal constitutional democracy and as one of the foremost and most effective parliamentarians of our time.

Mr Leon achieved much in his public service. There is one thing, however, that stands out: his championing of the centrality of Parliament in our democracy. On page 384, Mr Leon pithily captures the decline in the quality of parliamentarians which began as a trickle in 1996 and became a flood after 1999. He writes:

"The consequence for parliament of this brain-drain - and the scrutiny which real democratic accountability demands - has been fairly calamitous. It took time for the effects to be felt, but ten or twelve years on it has become apparent that much of parliament and its proceedings had become a pale shadow of the imperatives designated for it by the framers of the Constitution".

I could not agree more. I remember a few years ago appealing to ANC members in parliament to stop catcalling and howling when Mr Leon got up to speak, as was their practise, because, as I pointed out, he was a South African patriot and citizen and I insisted that he must be listened to.

I have no doubt that Mr Leon's record will be measured by the fact that his consistent and tenacious defence of our Constitution and the ideals that are captured in our Bill of Rights will have effect long after he has left office. These ideals are proof, as Mr Leon repeatedly and convincingly points out in this fine book, that South Africans share more in common than what divides us.

There was never any doubt in my mind that Mr Leon is a staunch patriot to the tips of his fingers. Tony's love of country is written into nearly every sentence of 'On the Contrary'.

I thank you.

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