

RHODA KADALIE'S SPEECH

TONY LEONG'S BOOK LAUNCH

On the Contrary+

14th August 2008

Tony, as a seasoned heckler, I invite you to stand next to me and heckle as I sing your praises. I am probably one of the few black imbongis you have here!

I am deeply honoured that you have asked me to speak at this launch. I find it difficult to strike a balance between a launch speech and what I think sounds more like your obituary, so bear with me.

As you know, I read this book from cover to cover in record time fascinated by your talent of pitting the banal against the profound. On the Contrary is one of the most riveting political biographies that I have ever read. It is a story of political intrigue, backstabbing and betrayal, and revelations behind seminal events, yet untold. Do not be put off by its whopping 700 pages - It is a warts and all, unputdownable, racy, honest, funny, quite explosive in places and erudite book (have you ever heard of words like palimpsest, cri de coeur, encomium, fissiparous, mephitic, hirsute, and lapidary, to mention a few.)

It hauls out anecdotes and vignettes from Tony's political life and paints them against a broad canvas of macro-political events in a most unlikely way. Like for example, the sad death of his mother, Sheila, against the marriage made in hell with the NNP; or about Zanele Mbeki at the polling station in 2006 elections discovering that she was not on the electoral register, and was helped by a DA councilor to vote; or about his wife's disastrous birthday in the Arabella Sheraton while the DA was falling apart around the Marais and Morkel saga.

The success of this book lies in the balance it strikes between Tony's achievements and strengths and his failures and weaknesses to the point of delicious self-ridicule throughout. For example, P.102 . his brief spell as a lecturer:

was nervous at first as a lecturer. However I took John Dugard's advice on confronting a class of 300: ~~Attack~~ is the best form of defence. I picked on various hapless students to answer questions on the readings they had seldom done in advance (exactly as I had not done in my student days) before they could expose the gaping holes in my own knowledge base; or the fact that I was generally, only a lecture or two ahead of them.+

p.146, parading with his girl friend on his arm at a public event . called a hunk stepped out of Vogue.+As he said, it did wonders for my ego.

Tony's book is as much about his life as it is an authentic political biography of Thabo Mbeki. As such it is one of the best chronicles of the transition, ruthlessly exposing the underbelly of the ANC beast. It deconstructs the rainbow myth by showing the mud and debris caused by the flood of political compromise and negotiation. It describes the sources of the ANC's lamentable political decline in the most unbelievably beautiful prose: p.706

But, perhaps more darkly, no futurologist could have foreseen the ways in which some, although crucially not all, the clothes discarded by the departing regime would be picked up and worn so eagerly by the government which supplanted it: arrogance of power, corruption of institutions, the triumph of ideology, the fetish of race, and the cosyng-up to repressive international regimes. These too seemed to pass, almost without pause, from the white nationalists to the black nationalists: in power, the noun proving more permanent than the adjective.

It is a story of backstabbing and betrayal, naked ambition and the lust for power. Revelations about Kobie Coetzee, Nelson Mandela, Winnie Mandela, and FW De Klerk make for riveting reading. Equally his contest for the DP party leadership against the Houghton dynasty . which he refers to as the political extension of an Anglo-Jewish social club drawn from a narrow social base in the leafy suburbs of Jhb and the southern suburbs of Cape Town.+Helen Suzman, Irene Menell, Zach De Beer, Colin Eglin and party colleagues . provide an equal opportunity expose, if ever there was one, and of his vacillating relationship with doyen of liberal politics, Helen Suzman. Far from it being united, Tony chronicles the schisms and divisions with ruthless honesty, captured in that nice line: Nothing divided the opposition so much as questions of unity+in Ch 10 - A Marriage Made in Hell.

On the Contrary is a welcome antidote to all the struggle hagiography that exists out there. Many people are reinventing themselves; seminal events are being airbrushed out of history; and self-censorship is creating huge lacunae in our political history. This book will restore some of that, calling a spade a spade and exposing some of the lies for which we have become notorious. It is as much a seminal account of liberalism and its tensions as it is a seminal account of a liberation movement, so obsessed with total control, that it has destroyed even the positive remnants of apartheid.

In deconstructing some of the myths created by the euphoria of liberation, of triumphalism, often obscured by the person of Mandela, it reconstructs a TRUTH silenced by the disease of political correctness and self-censorship. Having served with three Presidents, since Sept 1989, Tony seems far too young to have written an autobiography, but as a walking Hansard, this book will become an important record in the annals of our political history. With the steady decline of Hansard, and the rapidly changing political landscape, Tony's perspectives on government's mishandling of the HIV/AIDS pandemic and Zimbabwe are as exhilarating as they are honest. The Long AIDS Death march is a factual

historical account of presidential madness. The Chapter, 'Tangling with the Lady' on Winnie Mandela reads like a murder thriller and reveals shockingly how the apartheid government was as complicit as the ANC government in covering up Winnie's crimes. Equally his social commentary on the media, the judiciary and the gutlessness of academia, and Wits in particular around William Magoba affair, are illuminating and provide some of the best analyses of the deleterious effects of racial nationalism on the body politic of South Africa.

In many ways Tony is an unlikely politician. He is not a zealot, not a gentleman; he is a no bullshit man of integrity that one can trust. His autobiography records an inspiring political career of erudition, argument, debate, political betrayal and leadership and his gift for transacting politics at a level that infuriated those who could not match or deal with his logic, becomes more self-evident as one traipses through this formidable volume. More sinned against than sinning, Tony has always risen above the fray of pedestrian politics for which the ANC has become notorious, offering something fresh and new, giving content to George Elliott's adage: 'to be great is to be misunderstood.'

I remember taking one of my guests from an American university to Parliament for the presidential debate. My heart sank as we watched with despair the level of debate in Parliament. And while my guest wanted to leave out of sheer boredom, I made him stay to listen to Tony lest he left with the impression that all our politicians were like that. Tony's speech redeemed Parliament for us, giving it a level of respectability it would not otherwise have had. In many ways Tony punched below his weight in the National Assembly having had to deal with idiots like ANC chief whip Mbulelo Grootboom, when in May 2005, at president's budget vote debate, to loud applause from ANC backbenchers, declared: "One thing that you forget, you are here because of the magnanimity of the African National Congress. If we chose a path of the Nuremberg trials all of you would be languishing in jail for the crimes of apartheid that were committed."

Hardly ever given protection by the Speaker, Tony always engaged in clear articulate civilized sensible debate, always sticking to the argument and trying not to be personal. But that was often very difficult, like the time the ANC called whites 'fat cats'. 'We could have a debate about which party is fatter but doubt the ANC would win.' And he does become personal with those whom he detests - like calling Van Schalkwyk a 'cross between a boy scout and Billy Bunter' or Renier Schoeman whom he soon learnt had the 'morality of a puffadder!'

For Tony not much has changed since 1994. He has had to endure the racist, anti-Semitic, anti-English Afrikaner nationalist apartheid government as much as he has had to endure the racist, anti-Semitic, anti-English African nationalist government of today. A prophet often not recognized in his own country, he was often right in predicting so presciently in 1999 that unless the ANC got its house in order, it shall reap what it had sown with devastating consequences. 'And wasn't the means used in the struggle to replace apartheid . with its street

committees, people's courts, necklacing, liberation before education not in some instances as evil as the system it sought to replace?+With the stabbings going on within the ruling party against political intolerance, these words of Tony have come back to haunt us.

Tony has had a rich career in politics, despite his youth, and the country is the richer for this autobiography in which he has straightened out some records. In his 12 years as political leader he amassed 2 million supporters, 57 members in the national assembly, 47 MPLs, and 1 100 municipal councillors, and control over 20 municipalities in 3 provinces . no mean feat. As leader of the opposition, there was much to be pessimistic about, but Tony remained the eternal optimist, and this, his most endearing quality, drove him because he knew and knows so fundamentally, that the cause of democracy is greater than all of us. And so he fought on against much unfounded criticism:

%n this world, the optimists have it, not because they are always right, but because they are positive. Even when wrong, they are positive, and that is the way of achievement, correction, improvement, and success. Educated, eyes-open optimism pays, pessimism can only offer the empty consolation of being right.

The one lesson that emerges is the need to keep trying. No miracles. No perfection. No millennium. No apocalypse. We must cultivate a skeptical faith, avoid dogma, listen and watch well, try to clarify and define ends, the better to choose means.+

And in this he is a consummate politician . taking political risks and testing the waters when political events overtake us. His trajectory of dramatic sequential events shows that one cannot be in this game if one is not prepared to engage in some political gambling in moments of deep uncertainty. And this is what Tony tried to do by forming a coalition with the NNP. Many judged him for it but he, more than anyone before him, and in the ANC, knew that no party will grow if one fills it with %ones of oneself+. Creating diversity in any party is difficult but it is the only direct challenge to conformism. Zimbabwe has shown us, there is nothing more important in Africa than to create a strong unified, even diverse, opposition. Many journalists, who gave Tony a hard time, as described so eloquently in his chapter on the media, are now lamenting his departure from the political landscape. I heard some of them saying recently that it is only now that he is gone that they realize how much character he gave to national political life.

There is life after politics and I believe we haven't seen the last of this very talented politician. Already Tony has spent a semester at Harvard's Institute of Politics, where he received the kind of recognition so often denied him here. I wish to close with a fitting tribute to Tony from one of his students, Kensey Bok, who wrote a letter explaining why she loved Tony's lectures: We loved working with you, she wrote, because "you take ideas seriously, but never yourself."

This book will go down in history as one of the seminal works of a protagonist that has been there %a the thick of things.+Future historians will recognize On the Contrary as an original source and as one of the most reliable stories of transition written by one of South Africa's foremost honest and rigorous politicians. On the Contrary confirms Oscar Wilde observation that: %Anyone can make history. Only a great man can write it.+In this Tony has excelled.

Rhoda Kadalie