

RADICAL MIDDLE

Chasing peace while apartheid ruled

DENIS BECKETT



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PREFACE / Tony Sutton

Life, Death and Frontline

THE FIRST ISSUE OF FRONTLINE MAGAZINE WAS ALMOST THE last, because the editor/publisher/owner came close to meeting a gruesome end while putting the final touches to his first edition on a hot, torturous day near the end of 1979.

I'd been working with Denis Beckett for months before the birth of *Frontline*, trying to nail down the content and feel of a new South African magazine that would not only tell the truth about the country's divided society and set out a path to equality and democracy, but would also display a distinctive look that he defined as "flamboyant with dignity".

That phrase was a wonderful abstract guiding light, but neither of us was quite sure how to translate it into a form that would stimulate readers, attract advertisers and escape the axe of censorship. But the preparing and the brewing was fun and interesting, even inspiring – until the first edition's deadline day, a hot Saturday in December. Then the editor showed his true colours...

The plan was we'd breeze through the final changes and wave a friendly farewell at lunchtime, whereupon Denis would slink away and gloat over his beautiful pages, I'd dash off to meet pals for a barbecue and beers while watching the soccer event of the year, the Mainstay Cup final between Kaizer Chiefs and Highlands Park, on TV, and typesetter Liz Khumalo would go shopping.

Hah! Our plans slowly disintegrated as Denis agonised over every damn word of every piece of text in the magazine, nit-picking through more final page proofs than I'd seen before or since. Liz set corrections, rewrites of corrections, and corrections of rewrites of corrections, while I pasted column after column of the new type onto the layout grids.

Lunchtime came and I still had hopes of dashing off to see the soccer. A couple of hours later, as kick-off loomed, the afternoon started to slip away; by half-time it became clear the only way I'd get to see a ball kicked was if I slashed Mr Editor's throat with my correction-blunted scalpel, leaving him bleeding over his flamboyant, but very fucking dignified, pages while I fled to the nearest TV set. I weighed up the possibilities and their consequences, sighed, accepted my fate and continued until late in the evening, unaware that I'd have the same murderous thoughts again and again and again . . .

DENIS AND I WORKED TOGETHER ON FRONTLINE FOR 10 YEARS, producing almost 100 issues, never agreeing on an interpretation of that dreadful, haunting, line, "flamboyant with dignity". Our biggest arguments revolved around a basic clash of philosophies: I believed that if you're selling a magazine on a newsstand, the reader has to be able to flick through the pages and find the cover stories quickly and easily. That means a decent projection of the main features. Denis believed a publication's value lay in the quality and quantity of its text. He would have been happy to pack every edition with words, each story following from the previous with minimal space wasted on pictures or headlines.

Our relationship was neatly summed up in his introduction

to a book I wrote about magazine design a few years later:

“The Chief Minister of Kwazulu, Chief Mangosuthu Buthelezi, once sent me a letter. After lamenting my ‘confusion and vacillation,’ he proceeded to denounce my lack of backbone, commitment, clarity, understanding and much else besides. The only good thing about my magazine was ‘its very excellent page make-up and the layout design generally.’

“Well, I thought, maybe I should fade out of the picture entirely. I’d give Tony Sutton a few sheaves of Latin doggerel and go off to play poker. Tony could wow the masses with very excellent page make-up and layout design generally, unhampered by an editor suffering from confusion and vacillation.

“Since then, I’ve heard more of the same. People rattle off a long list of Frontline’s faults, in terms of range, direction, breadth, the lot. Then they pause for a moment and say, ‘I’ll grant you this, though. It does look nice.’

“They might say so, It’s good that they do. I don’t always agree. My relationship with Tony is, much of the time, a shouting match. The language would make a sailor blush. In fact, why sailors are supposed to be the ultimate foulmouths I have never been able to figure out. Hadn’t those guys ever heard of journalists, especially design journalists?

“Frontline shares a corridor with the Young Women’s Christian Association and once when Tony and I experienced a divergence of view – over headline size or picture size I should think, those are the usual – a serene lady called in to request that we retire to a nearby parking lot.

“That is part of what makes it worthwhile. Dynamic tension between designer and editor. You’re meant to yell at each other. Creation is pain. The trick is to yell without getting your innards gnarled up, which is not hard if you’re yelling honestly.”

Buthelezi, as Denis explains later in this book, played a major part in *Frontline*’s darkest days when he sued for defamation,

winning a case that almost led the magazine to bankruptcy.

NOW, ALL THESE YEARS LATER, I'M PLEASED I DIDN'T SLASH Beckett's throat that day in 1979. Two reasons: *Frontline*, unlike many of the magazines I've worked with over the past three decades, still has a remarkably contemporary feel, while its editorial messages point to the harmonious future that South Africa has yet to attain after 16 years of democracy, which makes it unexpectedly relevant reading despite the flight of years.

But, most important, Denis taught me a lesson about magazines – one that escaped me during the time we worked together. That lesson is this: Yes, it is possible to produce a successful magazine without elaborate design, so long as the words are worth reading. That will, I hope, become apparent to anyone who downloads a copy of the *ColdType Reader*, an internet magazine I now edit in Canada (you can find it at www.coldtype.net). The *Reader* is very much like *Frontline* – excellent writing, politically aware, searching for a better life for all – but without big pictures or extravagant design . . . which is, I think, what Beckett was looking for all those years ago.

Flamboyant with dignity, in fact. Better late than never!

Tony Sutton
Georgetown, Ontario, March 2010

INTRODUCTION

Lost Works

IT'S TONY SUTTON'S FAULT; NO TWO WAYS. IN 1990 SOUTH Africa came to the half-time interval in its long, long, race-war, the end of the old minority-rule jackboot and the euphoric moment of hoping that the liberated era would be wise and upright.

We responded in a million ways, one of my ways being to write thirty or so articles from my vantage point on the closing of the old-days. I quite liked these, when I'd done them, and wondered if they'd make a book. I decided not. What proper publisher needed a bit-player's account, when the stars were abundantly available? And I was already twice bitten by my own amateur forays into book publishing, despite those books having had a big mission where this one would be only a cobbling together of memories. No, these memories were written; there was a satisfaction in the writing, they would not intrude upon the world.

Nor did they, for ten years, in any form whatever. They sat on disks, big old WordStar disks, and life moved on.

However ... Tony had buggered off to Canada, where his

future prospects of peace and calm and working streetlights were a solid bet but he lacked the excitements that South Africa provides in compensation -- the broadening of horizons, the crossing of gulfs, the rising of the soul as it embraces more and more of what used to be alien. Africa stayed in his mind, and we corresponded.

In 1999 he sent me a copy of *Design* magazine, of which he was editor, with an article about an experience we had shared at a newspaper named *Voice*, during apartheid days. When I read his article I (i) hummed “I Remember It Well”, a duet about different memories of the same event, and (ii) recalled that I had written my memory of this event, somewhere.

My memory nagged and itched until it remembered those WordStar disks, and I hunted them down and sent Tony my version of the *Voice* incident.

Tony replied that this was interesting, did I have more? I sent more, and he asked for yet more, and I sent yet more, and while sending the mores, I read them, and I saw them as an answer to the “what did you do in the war” questions that my children occasionally asked and would surely ask forever. I printed a hard copy, evicted my Roman Law notes from an old lever-arch file, and, dated December 28 1999, gave the file a title on white masking-tape: “COURSE, a private history for Gael, Meave, Emma and Matt”.

Soon after, Tony wrote from Canada that he’d like to publish my memoir, as a book, if I’d polish it up and round it off.

This was a generous invitation. It was not wholly new. Tony had already published one book of mine in Canada, where there was no commercial draw whatever in a story of a car breaking down in a South African semi-desert. He published it because he liked the writing. That’s what gave him his kicks. By now he was well installed in the top drawer of the world’s publication designers, with clients on every continent. For fun, he published writing he liked, and he always insisted that – with the fierce exception of one theme, of which you are going to hear more – he liked my writing.

I appreciated this offer. I said yes, I'd be happy to polish-up and round-off; would he please send a draft layout, which helps show which chapters feel long, which stop abruptly, which pages turn on to single "orphan" lines, and so on.

He said, sure, coming up, he was just a bit busy for the next day or two. Thereafter out correspondence took on a new flavour. Tony in Toronto said, "where's the polishing?" and I in Johannesburg said "coming soon", and I said, "where's the layout?" and he said, "coming soon", and months ticked by, and then years ticked by.

Late in 2009 there was a fat download in the Inbox. It said, "Here's your layout, now polish up and round off, and by the way it's 350 pages and I don't think it should be more than 300".

I had forgotten this book. By "forgotten" I do not mean that the memory had dimmed. The memory had evacuated the cranium. More than forgetting the book, I had forgotten numerous of the events the book describes. You could have had a gun at my temples and given me fifty hints, and I would not have dreamed up, for instance, Ton Vosloo's glowing testimonial to my 1988 version of a line of thought that in 2010 is still not out of the starter's blocks.

Often, I laughed while I read. I laughed and I also thought. Neither of these phenomena is customary. I can read old stuff of my own – months old, let alone two decades – and cringe: omigod did I truly scribble this drivel.

But I enjoyed reading what Tony sent me, mostly. Not that it was cringe-free. I couldn't believe how cheerfully I talked of "blacks" and "whites", and even "a black" – nouns, and relevant nouns at that. From where I am now, that is horrendously primitive. Several places I can't believe my arrogance, or, the opposite end, my pathetic wittering about money-worries. Mainly I have, with pain, left the embarrassing 1980s thinking and terminology, small reflections of the authenticities of their age. With more pain, I have left some embarrassingly wrong forecasts, and when you see an "is" about some long-gone institution of the old Apartheid state ... well, this is a 1990 book that just happens to

meet the world in 2010. We should have called it the Lost Works; that's supposed to add value.

What I have done, mercilessly, is abbreviate. As you see, I smashed Tony's 300-page target. Twenty years ago my chief literary sin was stretching too long. More recently it has been cramming too tight in overreaction. This one, I hope I've made readable. You'll decide.

Thanks to Tony and, as always, to Gael. There are sore reminders in here of how much she has gone through while her husband tries to find a career. And warm wishes to you, dear reader. Feel welcome to engage, not just with hoorahs but equally with thwacks if thwacks are what your judgment finds. I love honest comments from readers, and get damn few.

I'm dbeckett@global.co.za

Denis Beckett
Johannesburg, March 2010

I

Shrinkage

IN THE SPRING OF 1982 YOU COULD COUNT THE PAVEMENT CAFES in Johannesburg without running out of fingers. You'd barely run out of thumbs. Yet Johannesburg may have the world's best climate for outdoor eating, or for any purpose this side of ice skating. Here was a paradox. John Marquard and I mulled it as we basked in the lunchtime sun over lager and fettucine at a pavement cafe recently opened in Jorissen Street by one Luigi, a bold entrepreneur.

It was a relaxed Friday. The day was clean, the air was crisp, the street was abuzz with cheer and chatter, a fair amount was okay with the world, and I was approximately solvent for a change.

John, crown prince of South African publishing, was more than merely solvent. He was about to be president of the Newspaper Press Union, was lined up for chairmanship of the Argus press empire, and he was winning renown as a

charismatic sports administrator. “Riding high” didn’t capture it either. John was flying.

We’d been estranged for five years, since he sacked me in a deal with the Minister of Police. The frost had thawed as time rolled by but a few chilly stalactites still speared the corners of our minds. Today was to be the peace meeting, the final melting of the spiky bits. John had been my hero before he did me dirt, and even in the time of wrath I’d been unable to suppress a certain stubborn respect.

His approach to the Great South African Predicament was the real thing. He neither sat on the sidelines and screeched, nor did he enfold himself in the corporate environment and pay routine lip-service at dinner parties. He got stuck in with vigour, working himself into a position of power and using it to make things better. We could have more of that.

We reflected upon pavement cafes. Why so few? Why did instinct tell us that this one, new and nice and busy, was not long for the world? We knew the answer, of course. The answer was apartheid. Apartheid was always the answer. Apartheid was the cause of every fault. Apartheid was why the country was short of peace, stability, justice, harmony and wealth. Obviously, apartheid was why the city was short of pavement cafes.

But what particular aspect of apartheid? We chewed it over. Latent guilt? Were white people secretly embarrassed to sit in comfort where the debarred blacks walked past, or was the shortage of immigrant restaurateurs caused by apartheid-induced insecurities? We chewed, but chewed desultorily. This was Round Umpty-X of the standard discourse, White Liberal Angst. We’d both been stuck in that discourse since birth, or thereabouts. A sameness was creeping in.

John broke off, saying, “There’s something I have to tell you.” Well, coincidence. There was something I had to tell him, too. But mine was loose around the edges, and anyway, he was in first. I assumed he wanted to offload his burdens about giving me the axe back in ‘77.

John said: “We’re going to Australia”.

I had my beer mug to my lips and there it stayed while the shockwaves reverberated. John? Quitting? John? I hadn’t felt like this since I whiplashed a chain into my testicles while trying to stop a dogfight. My mind’s eye still sees the waiters’ striped shirts, etched in time just as they are when you hear that a president has been assassinated.

I’d never known such betrayal. Not that betrayal was new, it was the rice krispies of the anti-apartheid diet. Those hard and fierce heroes of the campuses, who a decade earlier had derided me for insufficient radicalism and for nurturing improper sympathies for the wicked Boer, where were they now? Snowproofing in Toronto; yacht-racing in Perth.

Anti-apartheid was a rite of passage in my catchment. We were brought up anti-apartheid, although we didn’t know what that meant and neither did our elders, other than that Government was an embarrassment, that the National Party was the one you were born to vote against, and that Afrikaners were a suspect species. Anti-apartheid also had something to do with calling the gardener Philemon and giving him Christmas presents rather than calling him Boy and giving him short shrift. And in some deep, dark, and distant way it meant that the Natives would get to vote.

Since all the adults who we knew were anti-apartheid, what happened when they discussed how the Natives would get to vote was quite perplexing. Their veins stood out and their faces went puce and they called each other things that if we said, we got our mouths washed with soap. There’d be some arrangement; for the rich ones or the matriculated ones to lead the way, or for five or ten black votes to count the same as one white one. They didn’t seem to agree on what the arrangement would be. They amply agreed on what it wouldn’t be, which was a whole vote all at once. That wasn’t “anti-apartheid”. That was danger, maniacal. It was what people like Bram Fischer, the mad advocate in Beaumont Street, would say. But he was

Afrikaans, and Communist as well, so you could see that he had big equilibrium problems.

My peers, my generation, grew into being anti-apartheid. That was the English's job, like saying "chap". It meant you regretted Afrikaners. Except when they were protecting you from the blacks. Or from dangerous maniacs who wanted to give the blacks too much too soon.

So we rebelled, my generation of church-school-and-arts-faculty. It wasn't just that we had to rebel – I mean, look how they were rebelling in America in the second half of the 60s. It was also justice. We didn't have a distant Vietnam but we had a gulf in our kitchen. We were citizens and Sophie was not. That was the symbol of wrong. Indignity and insult and inspiration meshed in our heads and we leapt into The Cause: Sophie had to be the same citizen as us. We declared undying fealty to justice. We did it with passion; it ate at us, being isolated by our pigment. We did it with pain, sacrificing cousins and colleagues who said "of course we're against apartheid, but not one man one vote, man. There are five of them to one of us." We did it with pride. We squabbled ferociously over "Left", "Liberal" and crucial ideological distinctions that anyone else needed a microscope to detect. We insulted each other over routes and paces, but there was a binding core. We knew that the myriad problems – education and health and self-respect and water supply and neighbourliness and all – would go on until the new foundation was laid. And that new foundation, the basis for progressing into better fights than citizenship fights, was a whole vote, all at once.

That was our sole common position, but it was a commonality and it made us a band. It gave us purpose; it gave us commitment. The flaw was, it was a shrinking band. Every year, the Christmas card list was showing more foreign addresses and fewer local ones. The sense of betrayal was part of the equation.

But John? This was new. John was for real. John had weight. Plus, all that influence. Plus, all that name. The Marquards had been playing centre-forward since before the Trek was thought

up. They'd left deep tracks; their name was on streets and parks and plaques from the Atlantic to the Indian, plus a whole town in the Free State. John's father Dawie was a legendary educationist; his uncle Leo was the Jefferson of South African liberalism; he himself was father-figure to a generation of journalists, particularly including the new black intake to the ranks.

Now there were Marquards in the phonebooks of London, Vancouver, Atlanta, and here was the nearly-last saying next stop Sydney.

What had happened to all the Old Families? The Moltenos were as dispersed as the Marquards. The Van der Stels had never featured, nor had the Van Riebeecks, come to that? (Actually Van Riebeeck was a naked phoney: not much more than a holiday at the Cape and that under compulsion, but he got his wavy hair on 300 years of currency in mistaken appreciation.) Where were the Abdurahmans? Where were the Plaatjes? Where were the Semes? Chief Luthuli's descendants were abroad. So were Dr Xuma's. Let alone the whites, we couldn't keep the blacks.

John's bombshell knocked a hole in my own intended agenda. It slipped out of mind. I'd wanted to tell him I owed him more than he knew ...

By 1982 I was owner, editor, chief cook and bottle-washer of a three-year-old magazine, *Frontline*, which had done a few things of which I was proud. In its way it had contributed to punching some dents in the straitjackets of South African thinking. It had dropped pebbles into the political pond, some of which had left ripples. It seemed to be turning the corner in terms of the balance-sheet. John had been a generous *Frontline* fan from the start, frost notwithstanding, and now I wanted to let him know that he had unwittingly been the midwife.

But the shock took over. John talked of fatherhood. He talked of deciding there was no life ahead in South Africa for his three children. He talked of his sorrow at giving up, but, family came first. If he wanted an intact family in his old age, it wasn't going to be here. Aside from which, his boys were coming up for army

age. Were they now to go and blow people away, perhaps get themselves blown away, in defence of white rule?

Short term, I could see the problem. Long term, no. We could make a great society. We had good people. Decent upright God-fearing Afrikaners, just terrified of reverse oppression, that was all. Cheerful amiable honest blacks, patient and courteous despite centuries of tough times. All we needed was a resolution of the flaw at the core of the political equation. Some day – soon, now – a key would be found, a way to free the whites of the fears and the blacks of their impotence. That was all we needed, a way to bypass the idea of a simplistic racial swap, a mechanism to liberate the good in mankind and thump the causes of ill. People with contributions had to stay. They had a nation to make.

John wasn't buying. He'd been through it over and again. We parted sorrowfully. The spiky bits were well melted but I hadn't got round to enlightening John as to his credit or blame for the direction my life had taken.

I never did. John was still new to Sydney when he had a heart attack on a hockey field one Sunday. When I cried on the Monday it was not least for the unfinished business.

2

Leaping into the Riot Act

IN 1973 JOHN MARQUARD HAD BEEN MANAGER OF THE ARGUS company's four non-white newspapers, the Falkland Islands of the empire. I was tail-end charlie in the manager's office at *The Star*, the flagship.

I got there unexpectedly. I'd finished a law degree, worked for a year as a reporter at the *Rand Daily Mail*, and then spent a year driving a battered and slightly illegal van around Britain and Ireland, transporting anything from builders' rubble to an Irish rock band called Supply Demand and Curve. When I got back home, it was to a question: how now to fight the good fight for a better South Africa?

Whether to fight was not in question. It was duty, like an ox's duty to pull a cart or a hen's duty to lay eggs. But was this to be by going to the *Mail* and writing about iniquities in the macrocosm, or by going to the bar and fighting against iniquities in the microcosm?

Neither. *The Star* wanted an assistant to the manager. I'd worked there twice already, in student vacations, and I heard

about the job. I heard it was supposed to be fast-track stuff. I heard that the track started with administering the supply of furniture and buying the boss's rugby tickets. Not for me, thanks. But then came the sixth and last part of the job description: responsibility for personnel matters relating to the African staff. Now this could be something.

It was. The "black affairs" portfolio at the time was rock bottom in the status stakes but grist to my mill. Here were 300 real lives, unenfranchised lives, in a ready-made test-tube of justice and equity.

Personnel was an astonishingly free-wheeling terrain in the early 70s and *The Star's* wheel wheeled freer than most. I could do anything that I could persuade two people: Hal Miller, the manager, and Jolyon Nuttall, his deputy, to swallow. Both were sporting characters though Hal occasionally chopped me down for "too much too soon" (the prevailing antidote to the prevailing cliché "too little too late"). When Hal stepped on the brake he stepped with a heavy foot, but at heart he was a he-who-hesitates-is-lost man rather than a look-before-you-leap man, and my time under him was a time of leaping.

Leaping, for one, into elected employee representation. It's hard to believe now, but this was minefield stuff. The revolution wanted trade unions, which the government would not allow, while the government had its own structure of approved committees that the revolution treated as treason.

I wanted to address the standard management wail of not knowing what the workers' gripes were until they blew out. I figured that the more freely people could elect representatives, and the more freely those representatives could speak, the better. And there was nothing in law that said – not loud and clear, anyway – that African employees may not pick someone to talk to management. I put it to Jolyon, he said great. We put it to Hal. Hal asked what other companies were doing this thing. I said none that I know of.

I saw Hal wrestling. Jolyon said "is that a good reason to deflect us?" Hal looked at him with a Eureka expression and

said give it a go, but start department by department, not one big whole.

It was as innocuous as milkshake. Naïve, perhaps. Simplistic, patronising ... all those things, but it worked.

Well, for lots of people it worked. The works manager, Denis Jefferys, an old-style Christian of gigantic decency who later went to live in Wales, could never conquer the suspicion that I was a communist secret agent sent to stir up trouble. He was convinced that I pushed the committees into raising complaints, and he was right. If I hadn't, we'd have come away with one-line minutes after every meeting: "The committee thanked the management for the Christmas party", "The committee thanked the management for the nice new uniforms".

As it was, we got to the rudiments of an industrial forum. Complaints were mainly of tea-temperature nature but occasionally had deeper implications. One set of minutes recorded that "the committee requested that Mr X should cease to call black people 'kaffirs'". There were some deferential raisings of wage and advancement issues. I would record all these things and duly go through them with the relevant line manager. Most managers co-operated and most problems were solved in jiffies.

But the exceptions caused high temperatures. The biggest was the case of Mr X and the kaffirs. Mr X was a superb journeyman, a printer of brilliance at a time when printers took ten years to reach workmanlike. His job as compositor involved reading upside-down mirror-images in grey relief on strips of grey metal, and hurling these around by tweezer with the skill of a concert pianist hurling fingers over the keyboard.

Could a foreman be expected to disturb his prize journeyman's time-honoured right to talk of 'kaffirs'? Much sleep was lost before that question was laid to rest. There were other tricky moments, but on the whole it was all amiable paternalism, harmonious as Sunday lunch.

One day the cleaners' committee – the humblest of the lot – asked for literacy lessons. Why not? I advertised for a teacher.

A masters student named David Perlman turned up. David was the son of Ina Perlman, who later started Operation Hunger and oversaw its growth to the biggest charity in the country. David later emigrated and acquired two Canadian doctorates, greedy, but while he was *The Star's* literacy teacher he was a real star. When he was ill or writing exams or whatever, I stood in for him, which was a treat. Watching a bunch of tragically grateful middle-aged illiterates progress from letters to words, and one-syllable words to two-syllable words, and eventually to simple sentences, was a humbling and inspiring experience.

A couple of months on, the machine-room committee came to their meeting strange and stiff, no overalls, all formal. Alpheus Sunshine Matjeka, their Buffalo Bill, was in a suit and tie. A big agenda was on the way. At least it did not seem hostile.

Sunshine cleared his throat several times. Then out it came: Machine-room know they are lucky people not like Cleaners. Machine-room have been to school a little bit not like Cleaners. Machine-room are shy to ask if please the company can give lessons for better English.

I think you guess what happens now. A lower-intermediate course starts, an avalanche of new requests flows in, and half the black staff are on one or another course. In theory lessons were half in company time and half in employees' time, but practice and theory lost contact. A newspaper is not a shop or office, starting at 8 and finishing at 5. While the machine-room slept, the editorial department (and its messengers, for this purpose) hopped. Some people got an hour off work and some arrived for work hours before clock-in time.

Once in a while, a foreman muttered about hands disappearing while pressure was high, but complaints were few. For some, promotion followed, one fellow way more than anyone else, but he became a tragedy and he'll bother me for life. Would he have been better off remaining a messenger, with a uniform, a routine, an income, and a perpetual gripe that he had really been cut out for better? It wasn't right that he went on and up until he had no ground beneath his feet.

One day the Father of the Chapel – shop-steward of the white works staff (early printers worked in chapels to daunt censors) – made an appointment to see me about “the teaching that the Bantus are getting”.

This didn’t sound good. The Father was an outstandingly nice guy, a typesetter named Jay Venter. But he was also a person to be uniquely afraid of, the only man who could stop the presses. And he never made appointments. With Hal or Jolyon, yes; with me he poked his head in the door.

Were Jay’s members rebelling? They beat the war-drums often enough, always about the latest bit of black advancement to threaten their jobs. If they ever did down tools, there would be no newspaper. That was meltdown. It hadn’t happened for 71 years; if it happened over a frolic of mine there’d be no more frolics, no more me, Hal himself would hardly survive.

My teeth chattered as Jay sat down; surreptitiously, I hoped. He said “Our people feel that something is not right...” chatter-chatter. “The Bantus get all these lessons ...” chatter-chatter. “But we get none at all. Could we please have classes in Bantu languages?”

Thus was a Wits lecturer named Raymond Mfeka signed on for two hours every evening, and Zulu classes became the talk of the white canteen. Every white South African has said at some time, “One day I’m going to learn an African language”. Here was one-day on a plate, and it became a fad. Motivations varied from the liberal to the opposite (“I want to know what they’re saying about me”) but people signed on.

However, the hard truth is that for a white person in Johannesburg learning Zulu is a luxury. You hardly ever come across a black person whose English isn’t better than your Zulu is ever going to be. Within a few months the Zulu classes had almost evaporated. I hung in as a matter of honour until I left *The Star*, when three of us were still at it and Raymond was doubting he’d get anything past our thick skulls. Every New Year since, I have sworn “This is the year I really master Zulu”. Sometime in December I think “Hm”.

Meantime, the Zulu classes delivered a boomerang. The Machine room committee, entirely Sotho, staged a second solemn and formal representation: would the management please be fair and teach the white people Sotho too? Well, no, Sunshine's special-occasion suit-&-tie notwithstanding.

The classes cost little, the committees cost biscuits and tea. They were no substitute for unions, soon to be legalised, but they gave voice to workers and ears to management. (Voice to management, too. I think of my injunctions for ever more productivity and shudder – what were they to do, scrub harder?)

I still don't see why you can't have a union and an in-house committee. The unions don't like it, of course, but to get employees attuned to speaking up and speaking freely works for the good. If *The Star's* committees had existed in 1983 when a truly stupid union-sponsored strike broke out, 209 humble people would have kept their jobs and a lot of bile would have gone unpumped. But the committees were a distant memory, and so were the classes that the cleaners' committee had set in train.

So, in fact, were the cleaners.

In 1974, after 18 months in a pin-stripe, I began to chafe. I decided that the real fight was being fought by the fiercer – others said shriller – *Rand Daily Mail*, so I quit management and *The Star* to rejoin journalism and the *Mail*, as labour correspondent.

A little earlier, Adam Raphael published an expose of South African pay-rates in the *Guardian*, in England. The SA press responded as per script, recriminatory headlines on See What Civilised Places Say About Us. Poverty Datum Line and Minimal Subsistence Level were on everyone's lips, and famous-name employers were in terror of someone discovering what they paid their humbler staff, like cleaners.

The results were perverse, as was par. It was customary to pay old people more than young people. This wasn't a productivity thing; for labourers, experience is a commodity of limited value,

or inverse value. A young pair of totin' and liftin' hands totes and lifts better than an old pair. It was essentially humane, but when Raphael came up with his revelations, employers boosted the bottom level at the expense of the top, so 18-year-old Isaac starts his career on the same pay as 56-year-old Naphtal who feeds six mouths.

Also, the big employers re-thought their cleaners.

Traditionally a big company had its own building and its own cleaners, illiterate migrant Zulus with scrubbing brushes in their hands and square patches of old car-tyre tied round their knees. That was how things were; when you needed people you employed people.

Then along came the Poverty Datum Line and along came Mervin. Mervin had been at varsity with me. He was one of those guys who borrow your assignment and you must nag to get it back, covered with thumb marks and jam flecks. Mervin, like me, had opted out of law. He set up a company to clean your premises at less than you paid your Zulus with their knee-tyres, and you got the Zulus off your payroll in case Adam Raphael came snooping.

If you asked how he cost less, which mostly you didn't, Mervin said "easy, specialised management and the best equipment." He didn't need to mention the hypotenuse reply, which was that his cleaning staff – women – took home way less than the embarrassing sum that you paid your Zulus. He didn't give a toss what the *Guardian* might say about him, and neither did you. He's a contractor, his pay-rates are no business of yours.

Mervin is in Atlanta now. A mutual friend visited recently, bringing back photos of a mansion a la *Gone with the Wind*.

It was tough on the Jim Buthelezis and the Wilson Msibis. Their faces are before me as I write, upright bewildered faces, calling poetic blessings on my head if I authorised an advance of thirty rand. For them it meant hanging up their tyre segments on a kraal in KwaZulu, and no more income.

The same thing happened all over town. I don't say it was all wrong or always wrong. I know that traditional cleaners

were often useless on Mondays. I accept that an exec's fiduciary responsibility is to get better service at less cost. I understand that that's what keeps the economy turning.

But when my phone rang late one night with brick-loyal Wilson Msibi saying the cleaners had been given notice, I hit the roof. Never mind corporate ethics versus economic theories, these were Jims and Wilsons I knew, whose shaking hands I had guided around C-A-T and D-O-G, who had clubbed together to buy me a monogrammed leather briefcase when I left.

Two days later, in the small hours, I went to *The Star*, expecting to see no-one but night-shift cleaners and security guards. I hoped to find some committee members, to whom I would put a plan. I felt terrible about my plan; it was treason to the company. But deserting the cleaners would be worse. I wanted them to go, at a set time, two blocks along the road to the Urban Training Project, the closest thing there was to a trade union. There, Eric and Jean Tyacke and Loet Douwes-Dekker, the saints who had created this entity, would be holding a press conference. The cleaners' arrival would cause a flurry. They would unfurl placards with slogans about keeping their jobs. Cameras would click. The transparent humility of these decent, men would grip public imagination. *The Star* would apologise: it was just a mistake. The cleaners would get back to work and – bonus! – other employers would think twice before firing their Jims and Wilsons in favour of Mervin.

It sounds neat and planned as I write it two decades later. At the time it was terrifying. I had slogans in my pocket, foolscap pages with short words in big letters, one slogan one page, to be copied out. Each piece of paper felt like a furnace. It was incriminating. "Incriminating" comes from "criminal". I, me, was a criminal. Me??? A criminal endangering others, too. If the cleaners opened their slogans in the street that would be a Riotous Assembly, technically. Could the State be that humourless? Probably. Could I be sending the cleaners to jail? Possibly. And me, what would happen to me? Don't ask.

What I could and did ask was where the hell were the bloody

cleaners? After midnight they weren't in the office block, I knew; they'd be in the bowels, the four basements that housed the gigantic presses, each as big as a marquee and causing a baffling corridor geography. But there, all was still – when the presses thundered you could think you were in a battleship – and all was empty. I scurried down long bare alleys, half-a-floor upstairs, a corner, another corner, a floor-and-a-half downstairs. The catchy song about the Boston subway rang in my head: He never returned oh no he never returned, he was the man who never returned.

Finally I found a cleaner. A solitary old man, barely known to me. I greeted him in Zulu, sawubona baba kunjani. He gave the usual light-spreading beneficent smile of the working man stupefied that an umlungu is greeting him at all, let alone in his language.

I try, “Where’s Wilson?”, “Where’s Jim”, “Where’s Hendrik?” He is blank. I try “Iphi Wilson?” Iphi Jim? “Iphi Hendrik?” He is blank.

Later, piecing things together, I perceived some factors that eluded me at the time. For one, he probably never heard of Wilson or Jim or Hendrik. He knew them possibly by surname but mainly by clan name, a word I would never have heard.

And then, while I iphi-iphii him he thinks I am wanting a thing. It's like when a Zulu person says, “She did this, she did that”. An English listener has a woman in mind, which may well throw you off the scent. Your subconscious does not recognise that Zulu has no “he” or “she”; that your informant's “she” might be his brother.

So, while the old cleaner is trying to work out what this mystery object called a wilson is (and I'm clenching mental teeth, thinking “don't you understand plain Zulu, man?”) a lift door pings, just down the passage, and out steps what I think is a posse. John Philips, the building manager, is introducing Mervin's managers to the parameters of their upcoming job. I have picked a very wrong night.

John puts two and two together and comes to something

very close to four. I bumped into him years later, shortly before he went to live in Scotland, and he told me it had been touch-and-go whether he called the police. He didn't, whew. I was escorted to the exit.

Next day I had a phone call: "Mr Beckett, will you kindly call on Mr McLean at 11.30 tomorrow." It was not a question.

Hal Miller had moved up to run the company, and the new head of Johannesburg Branch, as *The Star* was known to its management, was Peter McLean.

I arrived as summonsed and went through the scariest half-hour I have known. Until the very end I did not know whether he was laying charges or not. I developed a crippling pain in the small of my back and when I was then abruptly dismissed the whole pile of emotions – about the issue, the cleaners, my betrayal, relief, the lot – were all pale next to the blinding terror that I was paralysed. If Peter reads this he'll finally know why I spent so long sitting motionless as if rapt in prayer after he finished reading me the Riot Act.

3

High Fashion

UNDER HAL MILLER'S BRAND OF OPEN-DOOR DICTATORSHIP I'D known everything that was happening at *The Star*. By quirk, in fact, I knew more than my four seniors in the manager's office and thus more than anyone on the 900-strong payroll.

How? I received the manager's post, as the new boy at the bottom of the pile. There were 100 or so documents per day. I extracted what I could handle and routed the rest to Fritz Bauer, the finance man; Dave Murray, technical; Jolyon Nuttall, the No 2, or Hal the boss (annotations were FB, DM, JN and Mr Miller). All of us saw each other's outgoing correspondence, which, in Hal's translucent manner, often included replies to things that had arrived as Personal. I was staggered by how much I was exposed to and more staggered by how much I could achieve.

One day, Hal's outgoings included a memo authorising the demolition of the company's Diagonal Street properties, 15 or 20 Indian shops with the proprietors' families living upstairs. This shook me, not least because Diagonal Street was a slice

of history. I prepared an appeal and presented it to Hal and Jolyon jointly. Hal countermanded his decision on the spot. The buildings still stand and are all cleaned up.

Power could get heady, even though it was wholly vicarious. I wrote letters for Hal to sign, often congratulations on long service or condolences over bereavement, but sometimes other things. One day Head Office sent the eight main branches a draft policy on Non-European Staff Advancement, for comment. I marked it “Mr Miller”, and added “I think this is small-minded.” The memo came back to me with “Mr Miller” replaced, in Hal’s writing, by: “DB. Expand.” I started expanding.

In the next couple of days seven branches agreed, some in one paragraph and some in two. I was still expanding. Finally I had a six-page response. The last line was an optimistic typed “H.W.Miller”, leaving space for Hal to sign. As it stood, this document was a worthless thing, empty imagination. If Hal appended his extraordinary Stonehenge signature, several separate uprights in a row, it would nudge the world a little. Hal signed. (And in time the Johannesburg Proposals became company policy).

Now, from Managerial at *The Star* (appalling non-word, but printed in large letters in the parking bays – Mr Tyson, Editorial, Mr Clegg, Advertising, Mr Miller, Managerial) it was back to Editorial at the *Rand Daily Mail*. My logic had been that Big Ills were on the go while I was administering copyright permissions and staff picnics. Big Words were needed, I had to get back in the fray

My logic was wrong, I quickly found out. First, an extraordinary amount of what I was writing wasn’t Big Ills, it was minutiae smaller than the minutiae I had been creating. Second, there were never results to be seen from what you did write about Big Ills. Third, the switch from command-centre to newsroom was like the flag lieutenant swapping jobs with a galley hand.

I’d known in the abstract that journalists are the mushrooms of the publishing industry, kept in the dark and fed manure,

but it was no fun to experience it in the concrete. I sat at a dilapidated desk in a corridor of the *Mail's* newsroom, pounding at a typewriter with a missing key, knowing nothing about the company that employed me. My only point of contact was the news editor, and here was a fine case of how newspapers go wrong.

Most places, it makes sense that the reward for success is to be put in charge of people. A good credit clerk is the most likely person to be a good credit manager. But not everywhere. You make a good carpenter the foreman, you can lose a good carpenter and acquire a bad foreman, who kicks the cat at every opportunity.

My immediate boss had played the typewriter like a violin, so he'd been pushed up the ladder and he played being boss like a chump. "How are you doing on A, B and C?" he'd want to know. "Okay, now do D, drop A, postpone B, and turn C into E". In the writing game your top writers should be treated like your top execs. But, no, they don't get the company car, they don't get the smart office, they don't get the top pay. So they get into the bottleneck race to be in charge of other people, the fount of status.

I had erred, returning to the *Mail*. A rethink was in order.

I supposed my nocturnal venture into dispute resolution had left a blot in an *Argus* company file, but Hal Miller was not one to nurse grudges. I photocopied the verse from the Bible about the father welcoming the prodigal son, placed it neat and tiny in the middle of a big sheet of paper, and sent it to Hal. A week later I got a one-line reply on the virtues of patience. A month after that, John Marquard phoned.

The centrepiece of John's "Non-white Newspapers" was *World*, the nation's second highest-selling daily newspaper and its slimmest. You never saw a car advertisement in *World*; never a property ad, never a holiday destination. You saw furniture chains and funeral insurance.

John appointed me to a strange hotch-potch job called "research manager", which hadn't existed before I arrived

and didn't exist for long after I left. The theory was that the research department would alert the advertising industry to the existence of a large and growing black market. Often, this was a ball. Sometimes it was sickening, when groups of unsuspecting blacks were gathered in front of one-way mirrors to discuss what colour toothpaste they preferred and how they felt on skin-lighteners and hair-straighteners. Earnest housewives would put on their best make-up and best English to nervously sip tea and proffer words of wisdom while unseen marketing executives quaffed whisky and guffawed at their mispronunciations and their accents. Many times I wanted to tell my clients they were odious arseholes. A few times, I did.

Nonetheless, this demeaning procedure did introduce a long lasting line of thought: Hey, these people aren't that different. I had come to *World* from Whiteland, which saw "the blacks" as a common entity, underlain by a common view and common attitude. Not least, I assumed, "the blacks" was a political entity, burning with suppressed rage. Guiltily eavesdropping on *World's* panel discussions, the overwhelming impact was: No, wrong, their thinking is quite as variegated as ours, and quite as mundane.

That message came up a lot. With it came a denting of the certainty that my gang knows best. That had been self-evident: we have the nicest houses, the most degrees, the classiest jobs and we're, you know, Anglo-Saxon. What is more we were the jam in the sandwich. The Boers and the Bantu were miles from each other but we in the middle understood them both. Who else could possibly know best?

Well, yeah, I owe *World*, it helped me out. One evening we're at dinner, among lawyers. When the host asks what I'm up to I tell him we have a project about black people who buy cars, we've been doing counts. I say that this very morning I was rigging up a survey in Soweto, way before rush-hour; why, we got started at four o'clock. "Oh really", he said, interested, "do they open the gates as early as that?"

This was a fine sign of our times. If you asked this guy, "Are

you against apartheid?” he’d be shocked. Of course he’s anti-apartheid, how could you ask? But he calmly takes for granted that on the far side of town is a place where the swarthy masses are chained until it’s time to come and make his tea. Confronting that level of ignorance in this level of privilege, I got to wonder about who knew best.

We produced our report on African vehicle ownership, having had fun doing it. Soon afterwards followed one of the innumerable conferences on “The Black Giant” or “Emerging Giant” as the great underrated marketing opportunity of the century, and my report was presented verbatim, minus a few “political” bits, by the boss of McCarthy Motors, the used-car giant. I thought I should go into public relations, I’d earn ten times more. I still think that, fleetingly, when I see something of mine made into a marketing weapon by someone who neither asked my permission nor paid me.

The Research Department covered a multitude of arenas. We gave ourselves a grand alter ego, “World Labour Consultancy Services”, and advertised (in *World*) advice on labour relations. We were early in this field; before our time. It would later become a major growth industry, along with barbed wire and security guards. We were also unduly modest, fancy name notwithstanding. For days and nights of solid work I charged so little that clients thought there was a trick. The trick was: I had no training in what I was doing. I half-expected lightning to strike that I charged for it at all, and I took it that the lower the fee the less voltage the lightning would be.

My main argument was that contented people work better. I know that’s platitude, if not tautology. But the routes I proposed didn’t always seem right to my clients. Some – notably Deloitte, or Deloitte Haskin & Sells, as it was – were lastingly happy. But many thought silently what only one said aloud, an admirably honest man at Gundle Plastics, “I wanted business advice, not socialist propaganda”. Since my qualifications to give him the first were no better than my qualifications to give him the second, I didn’t take much offence. I always had a sneaking fear

that someone would want credentials, and I'd have to um and er and remember an urgent appointment.

One client was highly unworried about credentials: *World*. John Marquard felt that *World's* labour practices could use review, and asked his new Research Department to audit employees' attitudes. This threw up some interesting problems and prompted the assistant editor, Brian Moulton, to come up with a favourite phrase, "We had no problems until we got a Research Department".

Brian loved that phrase. He used it half in jest, but some of the works foremen used it in no jest whatsoever. To Brian I could reply, "Be glad to know of problems that your blind eyes hadn't seen". To the foremen, I was Lenin and Trotsky and the Trojan Horse and Nelson Mandela rolled into one: Bad news. However, John Marquard was on my side, and he was a good guy to have on your side. He did not merely tolerate me sticking my nose into *World's* affairs, he encouraged it, even when I transgressed the mighty management/editorial split, which for an Argus manager was a sin of the first water.

On Argus papers, the editor and the manager are equal bosses. The editor fills the space between the ads; the manager handles everything else and it is 100% taboo for the manager to even think of muscling in on the editor's act.

At *World* the actual editor was Charles Still. Percy Qoboza bore the title, but all the black papers had a character called "editorial director", invariably white, who ran the show while the Editor attended parties and got his picture in the paper. This was changing. Cynics might say that every era claims to be the one that "is changing", but Percy picked a good moment. Between mid-1975, when I arrived, and mid-1977, when Charles left, Percy progressed from token editor to about 85% of real editor. He was helped by the supercharging of mid-1976, but the process was happening anyway. Change at *World* was alive and well and spelt M.A.R.Q.U.A.R.D.

I used to send Charles friendly suggestions, tactfully intended but I don't suppose Charles's 60-year-old eyes saw tact in quite

the light my 29-year-old head did. No matter, he bore most of them in good part and never retaliated until we ran the word “Iberia” in a leader-page headline.

The usual procedure for filling the leader page was that a sub-editor would wander over to the telex spewing out mountains of copy from around the world all day and night, grab some handy item of approximately required length, and slap it in the paper. Seldom was there any particular reason to suppose that our readers would actually want to read this stuff. The main criterion was to have the right number of words, correctly spelt. Anything would do, as long as it looked weighty and dignified. Sometimes we’d get foreign material about South Africa, and this of course was always an obvious choice. So a newspaper mainly made up for Soweto people would publish references to “Soweto, the sprawling black township south west of South Africa’s commercial capital, Johannesburg.” Also the vocabulary and tone of these articles was usually designed for highly-educated English speaking people.

“Iberia” was a case in point. I’d bet that less than one in a hundred *World* readers had ever heard of “Iberia” (which means Spain plus Portugal, in case you are wondering). *Star* or *Beeld* readers would be not much different. So why were we headlining “Iberia”? Anyone who registered would think we’d misspelt “Liberia”. Moreover, the whole article was full of big words and subordinate clauses and didn’t belong.

I subbed the article drastically, re-wrote the headline, and sent it to Charles suggesting that this was a better approach.

Charles nailed me well. For a long time afterwards he’d send me the most turgid and obscure items the wire services could deliver, with a sweet note saying something like, “In view of your great interest in editorial quality, could you perhaps find time to sub-edit the attached.” He used them sometimes. What he never used were the volunteer leaders I’d also fire off to him when I was het up on some social issue. Charles was not shy of telling me when I got overfar out of line, and this was a good relationship.

Which doesn't mean it was in harmony. In Charles's view, we were in a minefield and our job was to tread softly and survive. *World* was the ultimate also-ran newspaper. We rocked no boats, stirred no strife, stimulated no particular thought. We sold in gigantic quantities, on the strength of a stock of posters so predictable that we could have printed them on plastic and swapped them forever. BUCS MEET CHIEFS, CHIEFS FOIL BUCS, BUCS SLAM BIRDS, BIRDS FACE CHIEFS ...

Soccer was the formula, soccer and society funerals. Once a page traffic survey demonstrated that 85% of readers read something on the front page (soccer) and 85% of readers read something on the back page (soccer) and 5% of readers read something on the leader page (non-soccer). Charles exulted, "You see! We should have soccer on the leader page." To me the message was that we exhausted the soccer market and reached no-one else. You could not get two more opposite ways of reading the same survey.

Funerals, mind, I didn't argue. The next best thing to a soccer match was a Socialite's funeral. A Socialite was anyone famous, unless he was famous for business and was therefore a Tycoon. A good funeral could give us headlines for a week.

Among the black staff were several who hankered for *World* to get relevant, but on the whole they were half-hearted about it. *World* was a job; what the hell. Among the whites there was a sum total of three "politically conscious" souls. Maggie Patterson, later to move to London and be active in the Communist Party, edited the women's page and flew a lefty flag with subtle dedication. John Marquard and myself both ranked as pallid liberals by any rational criterion but were viewed as agents of the Kremlin by many of our colleagues, especially after the start of People's College.

This was the idea of Dave Adler and Clive Nettleton at Sached, a leftish education trust with a problem: they were producing teaching materials they had difficulty distributing. *World* had a wondrous circulation but blow-all content. How about putting the two together? I was invoked for no better reason than that

I knew Dave and Clive. I was keen, gripped with the vision of *World* playing a role at last, opening the doors of learning to the deprived millions. I put it to John, who felt much the same but bowled two googlies. One, I was to be chief censor from *World's* side, keeping tabs on Sached's lefty instincts and steering us clear of the government's heavy hand. That was fair; Sached was already in the Special Branch's sights, although their reach was dinky. Soon, 200,000 x 12 pages of their material would fall into the public's lap each week. We'd be in a white heat of scrutiny.

Two, I'd have to drum up sponsorship. That was fair, too. Sached was paid, from abroad, to produce the stuff. *World* had shareholders. Shareholders wanted a return. School-by-newspaper would gobble ink and newsprint. Let's spread costs and share credit. I put on a salesman's hat.

I had two problems. Business saw black education as government's business, not business's business, and an un-approved brand of black education was politically radioactive. The name "People's College" didn't help, and for that I had to point blame directly inward. I'd wanted "People's" as an antidote to a cumbersome working title Sached had offered, and I hadn't properly known, or registered – the term wasn't yet in standard use in South Africa – that "People's" was a slogan of the Left. It helped put off potential sponsors.

On the morning of June 16, 1976, I was in Southern Life's tower block in Commissioner Street trying to entice R20 000 from their foresight budget. The answer was No, and I returned disconsolately to *World*. As I arrived, a lime green Volkswagen Beetle was about to drive out, carrying two reporters and a photographer named Sam Nzima. Joe Latakomo, the news editor, came running out to the forecourt yelling "Elkah Stadium! Apparently they're at Elkah Stadium!" The driver nodded and off went the car. I asked Joe what was going on and he said, "It seems that schoolchildren are on a march. This could be trouble."

Trouble at schools wasn't news. A few months earlier the

minister in charge of black education, Dr Andries Treurnicht, had resuscitated a disused rule that required Afrikaans to have equal status with English. In the urban townships hardly anybody spoke Afrikaans, and the rule seemed so bizarre that nobody could take it seriously. But the Department had turned up the pressure, and *World* had reported assaults on teachers who tried to comply. The issue was far from general awareness, though, and the few sounds of warning that were later upheld as prophecies went massively unnoticed at the time they were made.

An organised protest march was new. Joe and I and the transport supervisor, Adam Ngamlana, known as “Tas”, watched the Volkswagen depart with – I think, or is this hindsight speaking – a certain sense of foreboding. “I hope they get back alright”, I recall Joe saying, and Tas added, “Also the car, we’re short already”.

I had assorted meetings during the afternoon, one of which was with the works manager, Wilf Symons, and the senior foreman Winston Randall about how they were going to typeset such insignia as π – pi – and the root sign, $\sqrt{\quad}$, for the maths courses. The way out of the works led through the sub-editors’ room and there I bumped into Sam Nzima with a sheet of contact prints in hand.

He said a child had been shot and there seemed to be general rampage. He showed me his contact sheet. It had 16 frames of a tall youth in dungarees scooping a child off the ground, running towards the camera with the child in his arms and a girl in school uniform beside him, and bundling the child into *World’s* Volkswagen – into Sam’s seat, in fact. The car had rushed the child, later identified as 13-year-old Hector Pieteron, to hospital, too late, and Sam had found his way back some other how.

The pictures were striking, and I said so. Sam said I could have the contact sheet if I liked. He’d given the subs an enlargement, one from the middle of the sequence. I took the sheet and we went our ways.

It was evening when I left, and half a dozen reporters were gathered at the parking lot talking about the day. What they mainly focused on was that a white man had been beaten to death. This was a liberal sociologist named Melville Edelstein, who worked for the West Rand Board, Soweto's administration, as his way of contributing to justice and black advancement. A couple of our reporters had been on the scene when the mob cornered and killed Edelstein, and described it with a buoyancy that I found upsetting. These were people I presumed to be part of *World's* outward ethic of respect for human life, denunciation of violence, etc. Yet they talked of Edelstein's last pleas, and the mob closing in on him, as if they were discussing a scene from a movie or a public entertainment.

Next morning *World* was the only paper south of the Limpopo that didn't give Third World War treatment to the previous day's events. I was surprised that Sam's strong picture didn't feature. Charles Still came under heavy attack. Violence had escalated through the night and the morning, and by midday the nation was in crisis mode. *World's* reporters were mortified to have missed the bus. Charles responded with heat. First, *World* was read by ten times as many Soweto people as all the other dailies put together; it had an exceptional responsibility not to inflame turmoil. Second, by the time *World* had gone off stone on Wednesday evening – several hours before the *Rand Daily Mail* – what was known to have happened in Soweto was not much more than happened about once a month at any rate. Third, *World* had recorded everything that it did know, just without as big a splash as the *Mail*.

At the time I had as little sympathy as everyone else. Later I got to wonder and I wonder still. June 16 was a turning point, but a dashed costly turning. Twelve years later you could meet matriculants who had never had an uninterrupted year of schooling. You could also meet matriculants who didn't know what a percentage was. Order and cohesion, family life, equilibrium, individual confidence and identity a lot went to blazes in the aftermath. In the long run, the turning point was

a turning toward liberation; no gainsaying that. But liberation hadn't had to mean collapse and decline, and maiming and corpses and broken hearts.

What might have happened if Charles had prevailed? If other editors had said, "*World* reckons it's no big deal, and they ought to know, let's tone down"? Would there have been as much burning the next day, leading to bigger headlines inflaming more burning day after day? Would June 16 have passed into history as another warning that things had to change? Would anybody have listened?

Dunno, which is one up on where I was at on that cold Thursday morning. Doubt, said De la Rochefoucauld, may not be a very agreeable state but certainty is a ridiculous one.

On the 17th, nobody was giving any benefit of doubt to Charles Still; everybody jumped down his throat. So on the Friday, *World* was as deep into Third World War mode as all the rest, and within days *World* was the epicentre. We had more Soweto journalists than anybody else; we got more information than anybody else. *World's* journalists became heroes of the struggle and *World* became the toast of the cocktail parties of the elegant north. Suddenly, the very height of fashion.

Sam Nzima's picture first saw the light of day in the Eastern Cape, in *Weekend World's* two small slip editions for that region. It went on to become one of the most famous photographs on earth. Sam got not much for it – a letter of commendation a month later. He quit not long after, and went to run a bottlestore in Gazankulu, where he became a member of parliament in the homeland system that his photograph helped to destroy.

The new mood and *World's* new fame combined to wash away my sponsorship-selling problems. People's College got started and proceeded with a good deal of (mainly amiable) tension between the partners. Faced with a government no less authoritarian than ever and a good deal more jumpy, we at *World* were more alive to the risk factor than before. Risk was less high in Sached's mind, and they were strong on the view that you had to bring learning to life by relating it to people's

experience, which meant Jack and Jill could never fall down the hill but had to get bopped on their heads by oppressive policemen. Everything from arithmetic to zoology brought in black dispossession somehow, and the Sached crew treated me as a hopeless case when I argued that people might find the learning process easier if it didn't recall all their worst experiences.

Whatever the flaws, People's College was certainly pioneering. It was a powerful blow when Dave and Clive were later banned. Clive was by chance sitting next to my wife Gael in a crowded seminar at Wits when the police arrived with his orders. They pulled him out then and there – his orders prohibited him from being in the company of more than one person at a time – and the Nettleton's children now speak with London accents.

4

Wednesday Weekend

AT THE END OF '76 CHARLES INVITED ME TO TAKE OVER *Weekend World*. My designation was assistant editor, but in fact *Weekend World* was an island. Both Charles and, increasingly, Percy would comment on issues after they were published, but their real business was the daily *World* and I had a free hand in the preparation of the nine editions of the weekend paper (two on a Wednesday, would you believe).

At the time *Weekend World* didn't run editorials, and had nothing of the conventional leader page which to me has always been the heart and anchor of a paper. But the daily *World* did have editorials. On my second Friday, Percy lightly poked his head in my office and said, "Charles and I are away next week. Handle the leaders, would you?" Just like that. He was gone before he heard my jaw drop. It had been one thing sending freelance leaders to Charles and sounding off merrily while Charles carried the can. This was something else again.

I started Monday's leader on Friday night, as soon as I finished the Saturday edition. I was up at 5 on Saturday morning, giving me four more hours before I had to get into the six editions of the Sunday paper. I was home as soon as the last edition was gone, and at the typewriter until the small hours grew large. Sparrow-chirp on Sunday morning, back at it. Deadline was 3 pm. I changed shirts at the rate of a competition squash player. Gael ran a coffee shuttle. The phone was off the hook. The pile of drafts covered desk and floor, each one still necessary for back reference – a point here, a phrase there, a judicious comma to be re-examined. At 2.30 I stiffened the sinews, took a hasty shower, and I was at *World* at 3 prompt. The chief sub, Mike Dodds, received the precious sheet in much the same way as he might receive the schools division basketball scores, and asked why I'd missed last night's party.

In some rational corner of my mind I knew that hardly anyone reads an editorial, and most of them forget it in ten minutes. But that Sunday night all I knew was that the second biggest daily newspaper in South Africa was about to PRONOUNCE. Obviously, the earth would move. And what it was pronouncing was what I was telling it to pronounce.

On Monday morning I was the newsvendor's first customer. Grasping the product with shaking hands and leaving him a huge tip I flipped to the leader page, and there was this weird and unfamiliar thing before me. Abbreviated, jagged, stark. The nuances mangled, the careful interlinking shattered. Above all, this editorial referred to "we" and "our people", two phrases I had been fanatically careful not to use.

Cold, deflated, I made my way to *World* with malign intentions towards Mike Dodds. He only started at around 2 pm, but as I dabbled dispiritedly at Tuesday's leader my mind was magnifying the violent retribution about to be wrought, which was a bit uncharitable since Mike was permanently on crutches anyway.

Finally, he arrived and deflated me with a cheery greeting congratulating me on a nice leader. I'd seen his desecration as

a deliberate personal affront; he'd seen it as a normal subbing job and a light one at that. I was astonished to find that it was standard practice to chop the editor's leaders around, and we established that I would fail to appreciate a repeat. Mike was happy except for one thing: "our people". That was the way it had always been done. We were a black newspaper, after all.

He was implacable. I was implacable. We'd still be fighting it out, but that he has long gone to New Zealand.

At first, my objection was the deception of white people passing themselves off as black. Later it was a bigger problem, the problem of black people, too, claiming "our people". Who was anyone to think he spoke for a race? Are blacks automatons to be told what they think? Let alone the flawed philosophy, wasn't that precisely why South Africa was stuck in a lousy logjam no-one wanted, because everyone treated "the blacks" as this monstrous stolid thing with a uniform mind? No wonder "the whites" were scared stiff of this entity breaking free, and turning to dominate them.

Never since has an "our people" been insinuated into anything I have written, but there was still a deception. When a leader appeared in *World* it was assumed to be a "black view". One of the NGOs, I think the Urban Foundation, had a newsletter in which I frequently read with fascination a "black view" composed by the very same lilywhites as were now holding the newsletter. This was a con, and I was part of that con.

When I instituted a leader page in *Weekend World* I wrote 99% of the leaders. But Percy took 99% of the credit and also 99% of the blame. Gael and I would go to lunch on a Sunday – lunch invites dropped like rain in *World's* high-fashion 16 months – and diplomats and professors would say, "Percy's on the mark today, huh?" or "What on earth is Qoboza up to". I'd nod sagely and mumble evasions. It wasn't wholly comfortable for me and it could be very uncomfortable for Percy, though not enough to stimulate him to write leaders.

I tried to don his shoes while I wrote mine. The balance got tricky. For instance, I wouldn't abandon the point that white

fear had to be taken seriously, and not simply sneered at as was the fashion in Percy's circle. But in making that point I'd be sensitive to Percy taking the rap at drinks with his pals.

I tried checking with him, sending him a draft leader on Saturday morning, but this came apart under the joint pressures of the perpetual transport problem and Percy's unchained lifestyle. I never knew where he'd be, and neither did he until he was there. (Many Saturdays I'd field calls from an agitated ambassador or company chairman wailing, "Mr Kwabuzza was due here an hour ago.") There was an uneasiness in this leader thing – a sense of unclosed circle. But the pain it caused Percy was demonstrably less than the pride it gave him. Within weeks of stiffly assenting to leaders in the main, Sunday, edition of *Weekend World*, he pushed me to extend them to the stepchild, Saturday, edition too. That was nice, trusting. He would regret it come Saturday, 15th October.

In the meantime *World* thrived, both the daily and the weekend. It has since become a cliché, in media/lefty/analyst circles, that this is because they became "relevant" after the years of 12-toed babies and socialites' funerals. (When "socialist" came out as "socialite" I queried that with the typesetter and he said in perfect innocence: "I thought I was correcting a misspelling".) There is some truth in the relevance thing, but there was also much else, including a huge Marquardian spur in the circulation department and also, in *Weekend World's* case, a school syllabus appearing free. Plus there was what you might call Iberia.

Weekend-wise I no longer needed to appeal to Charles for plain English and avid sub-editing. That was now my business. On the daily, too, a rethink on readability was on the go.

The *Worlds* had always been produced by literate people who wanted to impress their peers. Most newspapers had. You might argue that all South African newspapers at that time operated in this mode. Stars and asterisks and big type and such things were considered low-grade; even short sentences or simple words were a bit off. Now we were re-examining. And

as we did so I began to think that the end-point might be a long way further than mere simplifying of the Iberias.

At the same time, I got edgy about *World's* self-conscious blackness, not only because of the deception but also because it was time to pop out of the blackness/whiteness prison. All newspapers were either “black” or “white”, or white papers with black “Extra” editions, which was the worst sham of the lot, often presenting differently coloured readers with a message not only different but contradictory.

I wrote to John, Charles and Percy, proposing to de-blacken *Weekend World*, recasting it as a plain low-brow people’s paper – mainly addressed at black people, yes, but admitting non-blacks, too, to the human race, rather than explicitly cutting them out. John called a meeting, in his upstairs office. (We three were housed below, at the engine room; John had a glorious view of the factory roof.) It was 5.00, beer and canapes. We talked into the night. This was the kind of meeting that gives the word a good name. Everyone shifted view. Percy had wanted to kill me, Charles to commit me to an asylum. I had wanted to start tomorrow. We all moved. Charles was the one who said the obvious: too much was going on right now, let’s reconvene in January 1978, some eight months ahead. We left that meeting as blood brothers.

That was April ‘77. In June Charles transferred to the *Daily News* in Durban. John announced that he would not be replaced. Now, you say, “Of course”. In June 1977 you would have said “Wow!” An Argus non-white newspaper did not have an editorial director in the shadow behind the editor. This was major.

On a Tuesday morning in July, at *Weekend World's* start-of-the-week conference-cum-bull-session, everybody was as usual bemoaning the absence of order and leadership in Soweto. A reporter named Willie Mahloane said why didn’t we do something about it. The others chimed in – Sophie Tema, specialist in human-interest stories, Mothobi Mutloatse, later managing director of Skotaville Press, Duma Ndlovu, young and keen and

the kind of guy who made your day feel good, later to be a full-time anti-apartheid activist in New York, and Aggrey Klaaste, newly appointed as news editor and in effect my deputy.

It took about two minutes to decide to invite everybody anybody could think of to a meeting in World's big new canteen (the first unsegregated canteen any of us had seen – had that been an issue!) and then Aggrey, who can be plain-spoken to a fault, cordially suggested that my white complexion was not appropriate in this matter, so would I kindly recuse myself.

Next day Aggrey informed me that the show was on the road. Practically every organisation of any sort – churches, mothers' groups, stokvels, anything – that existed in Soweto was lined up for a meeting next Monday night. Monday night? When we weren't going to publish a Soweto edition till Saturday? We were going to be scooped by our own sister paper. Aggrey was abashed, but too late.

The meeting happened. On Wednesday our sister and arch-rival the daily *World* carried a modest account of the establishment of a thing called the "Soweto Local Authority Interim Committee". Thursday there was a desultory follow-up. Come the weekend we gave it a bigger punt, and the daily kept up a flicker through a few more tepid days. SLAIC was about to fall through the cracks when ... something happened. I don't quite know what. One part was a re-christening: a headline-writer on the *Rand Daily Mail*, of all places, gave birth to "Committee of Ten".

In no time the Committee of Ten was not just on the map. It was the map. No newspaper was complete without its daily report on the comings, goings, sneezes and shoelace-tyings of ten rather arbitrarily selected people and particularly their chairman, a sparky, sporty, Soweto physician, Dr Nthato Motlana. The committee got a manifesto drawn up by Shun Chetty, who was then a fashionable political-type attorney and later turned up in Thailand having left a fair trail of financial-type questions behind. The manifesto called for something that looked a lot like self-government for Soweto, to members'

distress when city-statelets were floated as a way of avoiding South African citizenship for South African people.

As the Ten kept consuming headlines like grassfire, wild rumours ran. This was a communist and/or Black Consciousness plot to spearhead the revolution; *World* was transmitting the Committee's revolutionary instructions in code to guerillas around the country.

At a dinner one night I listened to an earnest account, "direct from the Special Branch", of the mechanisms by which we had done this. The secret was vertical reading, said the Special Branch's confidant: you read downward, third letter of each line. There you'd find sentences like "plant a limpet mine in Braamfontein Wimpy today". He knew; he'd checked.

I contemplated with hilarity the thought of getting this code past (a) the right-wing English-immigrant sub-editors, and (b) the typesetting department. The Special Branch's alleged confidant got sour when I raised this, but it won his audience over. One round to me. I had the suspicion that more rounds were coming.

Then Manie Mulder, chairman of the Soweto authority, the West Rand Board, archly announced that the Committee was really a "Committee of Ten Plus One". Conspiracy theories shot into the stratosphere.

The world, with a small w, took it that Mulder meant Percy, who got touchy about this, having had nil personal part and being highly ambivalent about *Weekend World's* role and more particularly Aggrey's.

A few people at *World* thought Mulder meant me, acknowledging the Nat faith that it took whitey stirrers to make darkeys grumpy. So did at least one person not at *World*. One day my secretary Nomavenda Mathiane did acrobatics at her phone, gesticulating to get my attention and mouthing "recorder! recorder!" with her hand over the mouthpiece. I took a while to decipher; it would take a big while to round up a tape recorder. In school Afrikaans with English vowels she said to the phone, "Nee, wag, hier is hy nou." (No, wait, here

he is). I took the phone. A heavy sinister voice said “Plus One, Plus One, ons gaan jou kry”. (We’re going to get you.) What was this? Serious, joke, deterrent? It amused Percy, all right. He cackled his mighty cackle and took to addressing me as “Plus”.

The best bet is that Mulder meant Aggrey Klaaste, who had been the committee secretary for a few days until the conflict of interest penetrated and he quit. If it was supposed to be Aggrey, I’m surprised. Mulder implied an eminence grise, pulling strings. That wasn’t Aggrey’s style. It wasn’t Nthato’s style to sit back for a Plus One, either.

The Committee later transmogrified into the Soweto Civic Association, whose first incarnation dwindled and virtually died with the help of a good deal of police interference, especially during the ‘85-86 troubles.

You could ask which side the police were betting on. Their 1986 thumping of the street committees was insane. Indeed, there were some funny kinds of street committee, especially around Winnie Mandela’s Orlando East stronghold, and indeed the SCA, which gave the street committees a lot of kick-off, was a “political” outfit, but on the whole these street committees were a desperate attempt by the township bourgeoisie to inject order into chaos. They were about as anti-comrade as they were anti-system, and if the purported guardians of law and order had their wits in gear they would thank God for street committees. Instead they applied the heavy hand again, with sjamboks and handcuffs.

Back in 1977, the Committee of Ten pushed up the political temperature. And then John Vorster and Jimmy Kruger – Prime Minister and Minister of Police – took to quoting bits from the *Worlds* in critical vein. To a complicated bunch of mixed feelings by both of us, the leaders they quoted came more from the Weekend than from the Daily. The ironies were large. Percy perpetually complained that I was “pussyfooting”. That was one of his signature terms, along with “criminally irresponsible” and, yes, “my people”. He was in the position known as “reconciled to the inevitability of the armed struggle”, and I was not. My

leaders aimed at deterring violence by counteracting the causes of violence, which is to say: make the revolution unnecessary by getting the government to change policy.

This was a sensitive arena at a sensitive time, and I guess my point didn't always come across 100% the way I wanted it to. Try as I might, Percy faced flak from his pals, especially when I touched on recognising why whites were frightened. Now Vorster and Kruger attacked the weekend paper disproportionately, and particularly its recurring observation that violence wouldn't end until the blacks and the whites were the same citizens of the same country.

On a Sunday morning in September, Patrick Laurence of the *Rand Daily Mail* phoned early and suggested Gael and I meet him and his then-wife Vita, now in Australia, at the trim-park in Empire Road. We sat under a fantastic spring sky while Patrick played a tape of a speech Jimmy Kruger had made in Bloemfontein the night before. It included a sustained attack on last week's *Weekend World* leader. I'd been trying to get a message to the stone-throwers and the panga-wielders that while their anger etc was understandable, nonetheless they weren't helping by spreading chaos. Kruger, fury dripping off the tape, quoted phrases while the audience screamed "Skande!", "Vat Hulle!" (Shame! Get them!) and the like.

In my belief Kruger was quoting worse than selectively. He was quoting backwards. He latched on to the understandable-anger bits with which I'd tried to get entry into the mind of whatever putative klipgooier (stone-thrower) was reading the leaders of *Weekend World*, and he ignored the but-nonetheless bits. It came out sounding like I was calling for killing, looting, burning, rape, the lot. I hardly blamed his audience for howling for blood, but I got a hell of a fright that he could have read it that way.

I smelled trouble, and trouble came closer. On September 13 Percy burst into the Weekend's Tuesday morning get-together, shaking, in tears, he could hardly speak. He got it out: "they've killed Steve."

Steve Biko's death was a very wrong thing. As an attempt to dampen the revolution by getting a big-league Cheeky Bantu out of the way, it boomeranged championly. The anger! That day in our Tuesday conference I could imagine my own colleagues saying, "well they got one of ours, here's Beckett standing before us..." There was no nice rationalising about individual responsibilities now. I was white and it was my police that rubbed out their man. The national temperature went several degrees up.

But life went on, for the living. We had papers to produce. One of these was a half-baked Saturday edition which went to press at 4 on Friday afternoon. This had been a running sore. I wanted to push our deadline up to compete better with the Saturday *Rand Daily Mail*, the black edition of which had seven hours news time over us. (The white editions had a few hours after that). The matter was lined up for overhaul, which had not yet happened.

The fourth week after Biko's death, about 5.30 on Friday afternoon, the Saturday edition was finished and gone, trucks rolling out the gates and halfway to distribution depots across the Transvaal. I was packing up when Percy, ashen, burst into my office: "What's in tomorrow's edition?"

I gave him a copy. He flipped through, groaning and covering his face. He got to the leader page and groaned double hard. The leader was about Gary Player, the golfer, appealing for calm and patience from black people. Its thrust was: yes, everyone wants calm, so therefore people like him should urgently tell their government they want a common country of equal citizens. It was hardly a combative leader and was definitely polite to Gary, whose apologism for the government had made him a punchbag to some media. But it was re-raising the thing the Ministers had got so heated about: that they caused the violence, by denying black citizenship. Writing it, I had thought that Jimmy Kruger might mutter, or so might Gary, but Percy wouldn't complain of pussyfooting.

Percy finished reading. He looked up with the slow drawled

grin he mastered so well – his worst enemy would agree he had wonderful laconic humour – and said “I don’t suppose we’ll see each other again”.

“What gives?” I asked.

“They probably take us to segregated execution chambers”, said Percy.

It turned out that Vorster, no less, had summonsed him at lunchtime and in Percy’s words “shat me out from ten miles high”. Now Vorster was going to get tomorrow’s paper and think: Jeez, that cheeky ou walks right out of here and look what he writes.

We thought of recalling copies, recalling compositors, recalling machine minders, and doing it all again. We thought of it, gave it up, and went upstairs for a beer. Percy was amused that Vorster called him “Mr Editor”. “He obviously can’t handle ‘Qoboza’”, said Percy, “but at least ‘Editor’ is better than all those guys who call me ‘Kwabuzza’”. (The Q has a pop, like a champagne cork.)

On Monday, October 17, I went to the Eastern Cape to check on the health and welfare of our reporters there. Monday was in Port Elizabeth, a delightful introduction to the cradle of the ANC. Tuesday with Owen Vanqa, our man in East London; a call on Donald Woods, editor of the *Daily Dispatch*, in his picturebook antique office. Then Kingwilliamstown and Zanempilo Clinic, one of the memorials of the late Steve Biko. Steve’s cousin Malusi Mpumlwana showed us round and I was genuinely impressed. (Already in those days I was attuning to disillusion in the reality behind the liberation projects lauded in the newspapers). I went on to Umtata. Marcus Ngani, our bureau chief, i.e. resident reporter, told me Aggrey had been phoning, I must call him urgently. It was night by now. Aggrey wasn’t at the office and didn’t have a home phone (hardly anyone did in Soweto.) So Marcus and I ate the best the Holiday Inn had to offer and called it quits.

I never did get back to Aggrey. Next morning he was in jail. the *World* and *Weekend World* were banned. Donald Woods was

banned. Malusi was in jail. Nineteen organisations were banned. Percy was arrested later in the day.

Instinct said, “Better get back.” Brain replied, “What for?” I was confused. There was a free show in town: Foreign Minister Pik Botha, opening Transkei president Kaiser Matanzima’s new palace. I went to watch. Fascinating. Praise singers in full form, Pik in prize shape, hell of a party; everyone telling everyone sotto voce that the money should have gone into schools or clinics, everyone tucking into the Beef Wellington.

Politics, too. When Sabata Dalindyebo arrived the cheers and chanting resounded. Sabata was king, in many eyes, and Kaiser had cheated, boosted by his friends in Pretoria in thanks for taking apartheid’s independence. I’ll say one thing for Kaiser, no matter what, I’ve never seen a larger personal presence. Huge, handsome, sublimely indifferent to pygmies below, he bestrode that gathering.

On this day government was, of course, The Enemy, more than ever. But one of Pik’s acolytes had been a Judge’s Clerk with me eight years earlier. We talked. He was still a human being, imagine. Half my head was in Commando Road, *World’s* premises. When Pik was leaving, hours before my flight, I asked on a whim if I could catch a lift. My ex-co-clerk went to check. His boss was in a group of Pik people. I saw him speak to them, turn, point at me, and then say something more. At the same instant they all jerked like they’d been shot, and stared at me in horror, thought-bubbles saying: a communist terrorist in our plane?!

My friend came back to say terribly sorry, the plane is full, and left. I said to Marcus, “He says it so that we’ll know he’s lying, hey.” Marcus said, “Yes, but I’m glad.”

Marcus gave me a fine tour while I decided he was one of the planet’s great humans. He took me to the airport and bade me farewell with uncommon feeling. Only then did I realise that he expected me to be arrested at the other end. I hadn’t embraced this notion, which may look (and be) incredibly stupid but it also reflects a relevant mindset. Arrest? Me? What did I have to do with the world of arrests and crimes?

I made up for lost time on the flight. My boss and my deputy were both in jail, what awaited? It didn't help that I sat next to a guy from Water Affairs who chatted amiably until it came up that I was at *World* and he frosted over.

I was a bundle of nerves at Jan Smuts, but no hard men with handcuffs marched down the aisle. Nobody was ransacking my house, no suspicious cars were lurking outside. A bit of an anti-climax.

The office next day was in confusion, no surprise. What was a surprise was a lot of hostility towards me. I couldn't figure it. Duma Ndlovu explained: Percy and Aggrey were behind bars while my pseudo-vintage Jaguar sat calmly in the carport as per normal. If I'd escaped because I was, um, white, it wasn't nice. If it was because I was, um, helpful to the other side. . . that was bad.

Duma didn't take that seriously, he said, he was raising hypotheses. But the raising was yecch. Questions caroomed all through the anti-apartheid media, and beyond: Why had the net missed X? Because he was collaborating? Why had the net caught Z? To make him look like he wasn't collaborating? "Sick society" was not just an idiom; this was sick. For a vulnerable while I saw Marcus's point: how'd it have looked if I got off Pik's plane? But I recovered, and remain recovered. I talk to anyone, catch anyone's plane; upfront independence is my armour, all the armour I seek.

Percy and Aggrey put in several months at Modderbee prison, along with Motlana and the Ten and half the rest of the Soweto establishment, and although I have no doubt it wasn't fun at the time there was many an entertaining tale told afterwards.

I went to see them fairly often. I was allowed to on the grounds of theoretically being Aggrey's employer, which became a total fiction within a week, when I was quietly sacked. But I'd got in my first visit within the week, which made the repeat performances relatively easy. You had to get a permit for each visit, and each permit had to be got from the infamous tenth floor of John Vorster Square, Johannesburg's police HQ.

The tenth floor was Special Branch territory, from where Ahmed Timol had allegedly leaped to his death. Getting there was an education in itself. For one thing, you had to know how to get there. The lifts don't go to the tenth floor. When I figured to get out at the eighth and walk up, there were Fort Knox doors on the landing, solidly closed. The Fire Department should prosecute.

To find out that the tenth floor had its own separate express lift was a mission. People looked the other way, until I thought I was in theatre of the absurd. The tenth floor foyer fortified the impression – iron doors with cameras staring at you and loudspeakers wanting to know your case. Once inside it was plain old civil service norm: gigantic offices with tiny carpets in the middle; wooden desks with layers of pigeon-holes so you and the officer can only see each other's heads.

My permit-granter was a Colonel Oelofse, whose hobby was political philosophy. It took half an hour to get each permit – five seconds for the stamping and the rest talking politics. He told me that the Irish broke the rules. They were all white and all Christian, but still they fought like cat and dog. He had a habit of closing his eyes and tilting his head back while he took phone calls. I'd use the time to read the telexes on the top layer of his pigeon-holes – served him right, on the phone while a guest waited. One was a list of Soweto kids getting asylum in Botswana; names, parents' names, addresses, school background. One started: "Agent JG3 (Soweto predikant) rapporteer die volgende versette wat beplan word ..." Something like that; it was upside down and I wasn't taking notes – Agent JG3 (Soweto preacher) reports the following plots being hatched ...

One was a biography of a student leader, Trofomo Sono, covering everything down to how long he grew his fingernails. I'd met Trofomo not long before, with Duma. His arm was in plaster, broken by a drive-by gunshot. I mildly mentioned hardships endured by workpeople catching pre-dawn buses with smashed windows, never knowing when a brick would smash another one and maybe a head. Trofomo's reply was

masterful oratory, but then so was Hitler's. He went into paeons on the suffering to be endured for liberation and how it would never let up "even if it takes a full five years". I wonder what became of him. I know that some people abroad acquired big paunches and bigger chips retelling their former glories. I get angry for them. They were entitled to be here, sharing modest struggle and small victories with all of us, who let them down.

The visits themselves, officially to Aggrey though once you were there you could sneak in a swop with someone visiting someone else, were a bust. Maybe the detainees appreciated it, I don't know. Maybe their hearts sank when some visiting "employer" was announced to break into their reading and snoozing and chatting. You were on two sides of a thick window with an intercom contraption that rasped and rattled and distorted. All I remember is someone complaining bitterly about the person in the next bed not changing his socks.

I also remember picking up three men hitching from the prison gate. I suppose I wanted to express symbolic solidarity with my friends who were yet to exit that gate. I assumed these three were lesser-level politicians. No, they had just been released after braggably long sentences for assault and robbery. They thanked me profusely and called God's blessings on my head and asked why I was at Modderbee. I said I had visited Aggrey and Percy and they got alarmed, "Hau, no, baas! Political?! They get you in trouble!"

October 26, I was sacked. Me and my secretary Nomavenda. "Retrenched" was the word, euphemistic when a company employing 3,000 disposes of two. John Marquard dealt the axe, at the behest of the chairman, Layton Slater, and harsh words were spoken, plus written, mainly by me in respect of Argus ethics. I'd been willing to be scapegoat but I expected a little grace about it, not to mention a tangible tideover. What I got was Here's November's salary now kindly clear your desk.

This was on Wednesday. Tuesday, Slater had seen Kruger in Pretoria to outline the folly of winding up 200 innocent jobs and a taxpaying enterprise. Thursday, Kruger authorised the

registration of a newspaper called *Post*, which looked extremely like *World* in every way except its masthead.

I hope I never need choose between ditching a person and saving many jobs, and I hope that if any agency tells me who to employ and who not I will invite it to perform an anatomical impossibility. But that's not to say that John or Mr Slater (creepy, saying "Slater" of a guy who you knew as "Mr" all his life) were wrong. They kept food on 200 tables. I'm not complaining.

Well, now I'm not. As I went downstairs with John's axe fresh in my head, I wasn't quite so detachedly philosophical.

A person was in my office. Lo, John Miskelly, its previous occupant. Ten months ago John had reluctantly vacated this room to join the thundering herd of Assistant Editors of *The Star*, making way for new thinking as represented by me. Now the old wave moved in while the new wave moved onto the street. There was poetry in this, and a lesson, cousin of the hare and the tortoise.

I cleared out while he moved in. The atmosphere was a touch frosty. My crew of right-wing English sub-editors dropped in one by one to give me paternalistic lectures about staying out of trouble, and to give Miskelly furtive thumbs-ups.

Post launched on the Sunday with John Miskelly as acting editor (and no weekend leader-pages). Most of the banned organisations were eventually reborn with different names. Percy came back in March, a hero with genuine prison credentials and ten times more "politicised" than before, and took over *Post*, which became more political than *World*.

In the meantime, John Miskelly had troubles in the subs room. The old crop left, for diverse reasons, and the new applicants were mainly people who thought the revolution should break out tomorrow if not this afternoon. It was perverse. I'd been a "political" editor with a subs team who would fill the paper with soccer if they could. John the "non-political" editor was blessed with a bunch who would fill the paper with subversion if they could.

On the afternoon of October 26 I felt rancorous as I drove

home with files and detritus jumbled in the back of the car. Turning the last corner, I could hardly see my garden gate for policemen. There were cars everywhere – in my drive, lining my side, lining the opposite side. Police were in my garden, in my garage, in my study, in my bedroom. This is it, I thought. What else?

But it was else. They asked me a million bizarre questions, mainly about “a Bantu female named Jubilee, with long straight hair”. Not a lot of Bantu females have long straight hair, and I didn’t know any Jubilees. I had a sneaking suspicion they might be thinking of a journalist named Jubby Mayet, but I barely knew her at the time, and she wasn’t Bantu, and I didn’t voice it. I mumbled about rights and warrants, but the chief cop flashed a card fleetingly – it might have said Father Christmas for all I could see – and barked “Security!” So I shut up. One does, I believe, except in the movies.

Finally, switching mode from Hyde to Jekyll, they apologised courteously for any inconvenience and took off in standard police pattern, viz burning up rubber, petrol and brakepads as if these things were weapons of the Total Onslaught. From that day to this I have never known what was going on.

One thing that matters is that none of the rifts from that weird era stayed unbridged. I reconciled with John Marquard months before he died, as I told you. A year later we met Mr Slater at a Machadodorp farm and any residual antipathy was driven out at his fireside, which is just as well as he, too, died within months. John Miskelly had meanwhile come to live near me. We’d meet up at the shops and chew the fat, feeling quits on our mutual displacements. He’s in Australia now, and I believe he’s fine and flourishing. Long may he stay so, not least because otherwise I’d worry about anyone with whom I may have to repair a rift.

5

Waiting for Superban

OUT OF WORK, ABRUPTLY. GAEL URGED ME TO TAKE A FEW DAYS contemplating my navel. This was a fine idea but the few days turned out to comprise Thursday, October 27. On Friday morning after Gael went to work I lay in bed reading Tom Wolfe. The phone rang. It was Revelation Ntoula, editor of a new Black Consciousness paper called *Voice*. He wanted a business manager.

What I knew about business management could be written on the back of a stamp, but this was one-eye in the land of the blind. What anyone else at *Voice* knew about business management could be written on the head of a pin. Rev offered a salary much lower than *World* on the grounds that *Voice*'s belt was tightened in the service of the oppressed masses. I would soon learn that this was bull: *Voice* was too well funded. In the end its flab would do as much to kill it as government did. But the job looked interesting. I took it.

If I'd thought *World* was a bit imprisoned in its blackness, it

was a free soaring eagle compared to *Voice*, whose profession was blackness. Its slogan was “The Real Black Paper”, designed to say “unlike those white-owned Uncle Toms at *World*”.

But I was manager, minding rands and cents; I was not writing and I had no *World*-type worries about passing myself off as black. Well, not many. I was to spend six months or a year “establishing a management system” and inducting a successor.

Things worked, for a while; even shone. No commercial distributor would carry *Voice*, it being not “illegal” but patently disapproved-of. We set up a barefoot distribution system in the townships, with butchers and bakers and shebeen-queens and all. At first I thought we’d hit jackpot. Sales – actual copies bought, with money in the bank – soared, many weeks to 10,000 or more, but as the base grew, so did the superstructure wobble around the edges. Soon there was so much commission going into the distribution pyramid that we might as well have glued coins on Page 1.

“Self-sufficiency” was the buzz and I tried. I adjusted the commission structure and caused outrage. One morning I arrived at the office in Jorissen Street to find myself the target of a picket. A picket was illegal but these picketers hadn’t been reading statute books. They were schoolboys with a grievance and home-made placards. I still have one: BOYCOT THE VOICE BECOS THE PULLING THE 3c BY MR DANIES BEKIT.

The corporate culture at *Voice* was heavy spending and token income gathering. The Swedes and the Germans had plenty of the stuff, after all. Once I saw a telex spelling out how badly we needed a 10-ton truck. I blinked; shook myself. We needed a 10-ton truck like we needed an executive jet. I raised it with my boss, Revelation, who said (i) we’d surely need one sometime, and (ii) his very good truck-driver friend Taylor was out of work.

I reported both to Revelation and to the (all-black) Board. In dealings with the funding agencies I was entirely blindfold and substantially invisible. Nobody actually denied that there was a

dreaded white man lurking among all this blackness, but they sure didn't shout about it.

Part of my job was to look for advertising income. We got bits and pieces of routine "alternative" advertising, recirculating funds from the same pool of Swedish kronor and German marks. I sought commercial advertising, and one glorious day I made a breakthrough. Having never had any regular ads, the breakthrough edition showed not one but two – Albany cigarettes and Old Buck gin, large and lucrative. I strutted about like the cat who licked the cream, and there was euphoria in the office.

Next day Rev and I were called to a special board meeting. I wondered, modestly: would they give me a bonus or a citation? Neither. The attack was led by Sally Motlana, who during Winnie Mandela's banishment was the grande dame of the Soweto establishment. Sally wasn't having cigarettes in her paper, nor liquor neither. I was stunned. I said we'd never pay our way with the ads revenue from Single Mothers Against Apartheid. Sally was adamant.

Sam Buti backed her up, though not through personal aversion to the demon rum. Sam was godfather of Alexandra Township, Soweto's older if smaller brother, and at the time was in the top layer of media-approved Authentic Blacks (though he later caught a dose of collaborationitis).

A row broke out. The chairman, delightful gentle Father Joe Mzamane, hammered the table and said, "My brothers and sisters, this matter is causing dissension. We shall now cease to discuss it."

I said that was no good. Was I going out to get these ads or was I not? Father Joe said, "My brother, we will have no further dissension", and that was that.

Desmond Tutu wasn't at that meeting, which was a pity. He often had something sound to say. Him and Fred Bell of the Lutherans. Allan Boesak, too, despite a tendency to treat board meetings like rallies. Tutu had recently returned after years abroad to become General Secretary of the SA Council of

Churches, and brought with him a distinctive brand of personal behaviour; acute moral honesty.

One day I was collecting a document from his secretary, Elizabeth Storey – wife of Peter, the Methodist bishop who had (among other achievements) married Gael and I. Tutu emerged from his office, with visitors, and launched into a tirade, demanding replies to a charge that bemused me. It transpired to be an identity confusion. A prize typesetter, known to him as Yoliswa and to me as Sylvia, had left him to work for me. He thought I'd wheedled her away, but the facts as he knew them were far from the facts as I knew them. Simmering-down took place, with red faces.

A week later I was in a meeting when Revelation's secretary Mabel barged in, flustered, calling me to the phone. I said I'd phone back. "No", she said, scandalised, "it is Moruti Desmond." Moruti Desmond, later to be the nation's Deputy Chief Saint, was already the pinnacle of her world. I couldn't subject her to telling him, "Denis will call back", so I took the call in her office, quizzically.

Tutu had called to say sorry. He said his information was wrong, and even if it had not been wrong his behaviour had been bad, would I please accept an apology? I believe I managed to oblige. I liked this idea of someone apologising when he didn't need to, he got no benefit out of it, the event was drifting out of mind, and the apologist outranked the apologisee from backside to breakfast-time. And he had just picked up the phone unaided! He needed to go give management seminars.

Later, when Canon Michael Carmichael and his wife Liz left SA they had a farewell in their pantry-sized flat in Darragh House at the cathedral; a hundred people crammed in a space that wouldn't swing a cat. Tutu and I and John Allen, president of the journalists' union and later Tutu's chief of staff, were nose-to-nose in a corner, arguing. Tutu was on about white liberals having to toe the liberation line or "the time will come that we judge you, we shall judge you with love, but we shall judge you". Vintage Tutu, both the judging and the love. I

objected that “the blacks” judging “the whites” was good ol’ racism again, and unhelpful. Plus, if you hold out Nuremberg Trials you can’t be surprised that whites dig in. Tutu objected right back and volume levels rose a bit.

An hour or two later Tutu painstakingly slalomed through the crush, toward me. He said “before I leave I want you to be clear that I think you are wrong. And as clear that I do not doubt your right to be wrong.” Class act.

Voice’s first banning order came in March ‘78, causing shock and consternation. Three weeks later, the next. By the end of May it was weekly, and each ban in its own right elicited a yawn. But there was a but, a big but. To each ban in its own right, pfft; but Superban was coming, the “and all subsequent editions” ban that would wipe us out. (*World* had been dealt a one-off nuclear ban under the Internal Security Act. *Voice’s* bannings were cat-and-mouse by the Publications Act.)

The axe quivering overhead exacerbated tensions, and then came two arrests. Juby Mayet, the aforementioned non-Bantu with long straight hair, was picked up at home one evening. As her official employer, I could visit her in women’s section, Johannesburg Fort. The first time I waited a long while on the visitors’ side, and got worried. Then Juby came staggering in from the prisoner side, panting and sweating. Omigod!

“Juby, what are they doing to you?” I gasped. “Nothing”, said Juby lyrically, “We’ve been dancing on the quadrangle.”

Juby’s lyricism did not last. Each subsequent visit she was more depressed, and more worried about her eight kids, and had a longer list of bills and problems for me to handle.

Zakes Mofokeng had been one of the incredible number of respondents to an ad I ran in *Voice* for my potential successor. Hundreds applied, but most thought that pigment was the sole qualifier, and many considered it unnecessary or even sell-out to claim an interest in bourgeois trivia like revenue.

Two people fitted the bill and one of them, Cyril Kobus, fitted it like a glove. I wanted to appoint him at all costs but “all costs” was the problem. Cyril’s salary ideas were large and

when I put his case to my board, one member said indignantly, “Does he think he’s white?”

One school of boardroom thought was willing to pay a “white” salary if we got a “white” job. The other wanted a “committed” manager, willing to make sacrifices in the service of the struggle. I asked this school how much sacrificing they’d be doing if they commanded a Cyril-type salary. This did not go down well and Cyril was vetoed. He became general manager of the premier soccer league instead, and passed a decade of extreme acclaim that ended with a thump, in court.

The thumbs-down on Cyril left me with Zakes, and I wasn’t complaining. Zakes didn’t offer whizz-bang managership but he brought marvellous humanship. At first meeting, moreover, we impressed each other hugely. What impressed me hugely was that he had written a brilliant unknown play called *The Train*. What impressed him hugely was that I had seen it. That was thanks to our friend Terry Lamont-Smith, hon accountant to a backstreet drama company. Performances were not so much “a run” at “a theatre” as one night in a Naledi church hall, Tuesday week in a shed in Diepkloof, grab it when you can. Our night was in Dorkay House, Ian Bernhardt’s prodigious contribution to sustaining black drama, with an audience of four, Gael and I, a woman knitting, and a purse-lipped white man who proffered nor nod nor clap from start to end.

Zakes was signed on. A succession plan! Yo, we felt like real managers.

For a few months, all was on track. Then, one morning an advertising chap named John Cooney was in my office. Zakes walked in with the design for a bumper-sticker in his hand and two white men behind him. Funny that the bumper-sticker company sends two reps, I thought. I glanced at the sticker and said, “That looks fine”.

“No”, said Zakes, “They’re taking me away”.

One cop nodded, “Section 6”. That was the worst of all, the one that allowed “questioning” and which had led to the demise of Steve Biko, among others. Zakes was so placid – for

him detention was old news – that he calmed me down. The cops sat quietly in a corner of my office, drinking several cups of tea while Zakes briefed me on matters in progress, bumper-stickers and beyond. Then he stood up, held his hands out like Jesus blessing Rio de Janeiro, and said “Let’s go”.

The staff lined the narrow corridor, sombre as a funeral. Zakes shook hands and slapped shoulders, telling us to cheer up.

He and his wife Makgauta had recently found a flat in Newclare. A photographer, Ruben Ground, a.k.a. Ruben Mabu Ground-Nkadimeng – he could be coloured or African at whim, or double-barrelled for class – went off in his beloved smart Volvo to apprise Makgauta. She saw him pull up and take Zakes’s black briefcase out of the car. She knew the story before he got to the door.

So she told me next day, when I called. Makgauta told me other things that stuck. When she was detained she had to stand for 11 days, while forgotten cuts and scratches re-appeared. She’d see a weal on her leg and re-live a childhood game. Now with Zakes away she felt extra insecure in Newclare. It’s a coloured area and some of the neighbours were muttering about blacks moving in. While she talked she was painting the flat – “you’ve got to assume the best”, she said.

There was no seeing Zakes under Section 6 – not by employer, lawyer, magistrate, anyone – but we did see him again and a good deal sooner than anyone thought. After a month there was a phone call which I first thought might have been from Timbuktu. It took a lot of “whats?” to believe it was Zakes saying “I’m coming”.

Again I said “what?” The only way Section 6 ended in a month was feet first. Coming where, when? Was he crazy, was I crazy? I prepared for a party, feeling foolish.

In half an hour Zakes arrived with Letsatsi Mosala, trade unionist. The welcome signs were half way up, but consumables were ready.

What started as a party turned into a war. On the third

or fourth refill, the chief sub, Mike Norton, made a speech, “The management” hadn’t done nearly enough to get Zakes out of jail, (was I supposed to storm Pretoria?) and, “The management” must make amends by suing the Prime Minister. Mike was backed up by his cohorts, Paul Cain, whose real name was Sam Pop, and Steve Young. They all broadsided me, the insidious fifth-columnist white liberal. I was um um umming; stunned and wordless. The reporters’ lips were zipped. It was very uncomfortable. After a while Zakes, man of the moment, said he’d been in jail, he was out of jail, enough. But blood had been tasted. The “white liberal presence” was on the menu. Honeymoon over.

The editorial staff of *Voice* were (a) reporters, on the south side and all African, and (b) sub-editors, on the north side and all coloured/Indian, aside from Tony Sutton, whose full-time job was editor of *Drum*, the granddad of “black” periodicals. Tony, mad, English, and a raving workaholic with a fascination for Africa, had been invited to redesign *Voice* shortly before I arrived and was thereafter inveigled in on deadline days to design the front page. (Still mad, still workaholic and still, albeit from the tempering distance of Toronto, an Africophile, he continues to do irrational things like publishing stuff that adds to thought but loses him money.)

Of full-timers, including full-time hangers-around as well as formal employees, there were eight or ten on each side. They all supposedly shared the same philosophy, Black Consciousness (Tony and I being definitively uninvited) but internal dynamics were not rock-solid. The north side was known on the south as “the colouredstan”, and in unguarded moments the coloured-stan referred to the south as “the drivelpit”. (All sub-editors believe they are uniquely cursed with the worst reporters in history, but *Voice*’s subs faced some special tests.)

The ideological engine-room was unequivocally the north side. One sub in particular had spent much of his life being white, or passing for white, and now had to be the blackest black in town. I didn’t blame him for being hung up, I blamed

our idiot society that made people resent their own skin. Nor did I blame any of the others for their complicated anxieties over identity and solidarity. But I bore the brunt. As the resident non-member of The United Brotherhood of All Black People No Matter How Pale Their Pigment, I, you see, had to have a vested interest in keeping blacks down, an inner need to preserve black dependency on the white man.

In principle, I didn't blame them for that either. Plenty of whiteys took the put-down view, and my approach was no less selfish, just more logical: the quicker the blacks moved up, the less pain they'd cause my life. But it gets tiresome being eternally tarred – uh, make that whitewashed – with a racist brush, especially in the holy name of anti-racism, and the manifestations could be bizarre.

One day the Colouredstan produced an alternative promotional brochure (“The management” hadn't tried hard enough, you understand). This brochure happily proclaimed that we were selling 30,000 copies. At the time we were printing 15,000, and only in my dreams did we sell them all. I hit the roof, and, more effectually, destroyed the brochure.

An hour later Revelation called me to his office, where a general staff meeting was on the go under the agenda: “Manager's Disloyalty”. Subs as prosecutors, reporters as wavering and confused jury, Revelation urging peace, my sense of humour under strain.

Meantime, the “management structure” was up to full strength. Zakes, when he took over, was to have two lieutenants: Bernard Kgantsi on admin and Mandla Matimba, circulation. Mandla was royal game, barely 20 and already been in jail (during the '76 chaos). Bernard was suspect; he had worked for a mining house, JCI. Uh, oh.

Then Bernard put a memo on the notice-boards, urging reporters to “proof-read your copy before it is typeset”.

Strictly, “proof-read” is what you do once you have a proof, which is after the typesetting. Before, you correct your copy, or check it. You don't use the word ‘proof-read’. So, fine, Bernard

used a wrong word. What he meant was very clear: Reporters, please get your spelling right, or the subs miss your errors, the typesetter sets them, and time and money are wasted.

But the subs raised blitzkrieg: look at this ignorant mining house lackey not knowing what proof-read means!

I defended Bernard. Zakes defended Bernard. Bernard shouldn't have to be defended. Revelation ducked. The reporters' room was supine. *Voice* was supposed to be a harbinger of how the new society would work. This way?

Underlying the fraying was our rising banability factor. On the surface, the bans were masterpieces of bureaucratic illogic. We appeared on Wednesday, and sold until Monday. The following Friday's Government Gazette made it illegal to sell the edition that nobody had sold for the last four days. Technically, this ban was empty, but did your normal policeman, and/or samoosa-shop owner, know that? No, he did not.

In the townships a few bold shops distributed us *because* we were being banned all the time. In town, and more importantly in industrial areas, shopkeepers shooed our people away on sight. Where *Post* was brandished on street corners, if you looked around carefully you'd see a guy skulking nearby with an opaque plastic bag, from which if you asked him he'd give you a *Voice* for 10c.

The second anniversary of June 16 was coming. The country was thick with expectation – whether in hope or fear – of drama on the way. I know what I dreamt of on Thursday nights, and it was the same for others. I dreamt of the Government Gazette, and of a nebulous silly-looking four-word phrase "... and all subsequent editions."

I don't think anyone expected us to survive until June 16, but someone in Publications had a sense of humour, or torture. Each week we loyally featured in the bannings list – *Voice*, Vol 2 No 13; *Voice* Vol 2 No 14 – but not those funny four words.

Meantime, we were taking all the evasive actions we could. I and Professor Lighton at the Directorate of Publications spent half our day on the phone to each other. The publications

committees which did the banning were meant to be anonymous and variegated (and “representative of the general population”), but all our banning orders betrayed the same pen, which we unofficially knew belonged to Prof Andrew Murray of the University of Cape Town. His trademark was his detailed knowledge of communist history, and our “anonymous” reasons regularly tracked heartfelt cries of protest by desperate township youth back to some abstruse instruction given by Lenin to the Third Comintern in 1919.

We often appealed but never won, which seemed extra-wrong to me because the Appeals chairman, Judge Lammie Snyman, held a special place in my personal history. He was the first ranking-type Afrikaner I ever sat with, talked to, ate with.

Where I grew up, “Afrikaner” meant the police sergeant who came to arrest the maid’s husband for Pass Offence. The charmed triangle stretching north of Johannesburg between Louis Botha and Jan Smuts avenues (the two Prime Ministers who befriended the English) was Britain-in-the-Sun. Afrikaners were somewhere else and welcome to stay there, with their pencil moustaches and the combs in their socks.

While I studied for an LLB I worked at the Supreme Court as a judge’s clerk, and was amazed to discover that one could actually discuss things with Afrikaners. It was in our language, of course; that was reflex, they switched seamlessly in genetic expectation that our Afrikaans would amount to goya moora. (They misjudged us: we were also excellent on buy a donkey.) Exposure meant growth, and discovering Afrikaner humanness was wondrous, but it was still culture-shock when my fellow clerk Marlene Snyman invited me to a party at the wondrously rambling peri-urban seat of her father and boss, Judge Lammie. A party? Where people would quite possibly just speak Afrikaans, as if that was an okay thing to do? This was very novel.

Lammie round the braai was terrific. I came away bemused: Afrikaner dignitaries were mensches; why did people say nasty things about them? Lammie on the Appeals Board was something else. I said nasty things.

At one of my appeals – I did some and Oliver Barrett of Bowen’s attorneys did some, neither of us very fond of the other’s style – Lammie stabbed his finger at a picture of the lawyer Priscilla Jana giving a Black Power salute. “And this fat woman”, said Lammie, “why’s she waving her fist in the air?” I didn’t rate our chances highly.

We also tried the route of having lawyers check our copy. I hated this. I’d seen it at the *Mail* and *The Star*. It could be legit for a complicated interpretation of an awkward Act, but it was a dud way of handling the routine “unrest” report and doubly dud when what you were fighting was the Publications Act.

The Publications Act exempts members of the Newspaper Press Union, which is to say, the big and the strong. It applies to the rats and mice and its criteria are simple in the extreme. The big one prohibits jeopardy to the “peace and good order of the State” and the other four are just as blunt. You don’t need matric to work them out, let alone a law degree, and it was perverse for editors to have lawyers do their editing for them. Lawyers must keep you out of trouble. If you get a writ or a ban they’ve failed, they have to be over-cautious. Editors are there to print what’s right to print, and I doubt there’s a nation on the planet where this doesn’t involve some creative gap-taking from time to time.

I argued the lawyers-aren’t-editors case to *Voice*’s board. Half were with me until Tutu replied, and scored a walkover. I’d argued principle where Tutu recognised reality: Revelation, the editor, was not a decision-maker and the subs room, which decided what went in and what did not, was on another planet.

Once when the Anglican synod issued a complex political statement, a sub dealt with the confusing bits by chopping them out. Mike Norton, on deadline and working as usual like a Trojan, saw that the piece read wrong. It was not Mike’s style to leave things that he saw were wrong. He dealt with the hanging half-sentences by chopping them out as well. Thus did *Voice* publish the synod as having resolved the opposite of what the resolution said the synod had resolved.

Next day Bishop Timothy Bavin wrote to Rev, admirably restrained, with a closing injunction to beware “irresponsible reporting”. Rev delegated it to me. I tracked the route. I recommended that (a) we run an apology and correction, and (b) Mike and Rev go see the bishop and unqueer the pitch.

Next week there was no apology; but there was the original statement in full length and perplexity. I enquired. Mike said there was no better apology than to give them all that space; what more did I want? So what a sub hadn’t been able to master, we inflicted holus on the general reader. And Bavin received only a letter from Paul Cain, the reporter, claiming damages for the use of the word “irresponsible”.

This episode was par, so I wasn’t het up about Tutu winning on the lawyers.

The next few editions were final-edited by Bowens, and a more respectable law firm you do not get. Oliver Barrett was the boss and his assistant Debbie Dison was resident commissioner. No-one did more than Debbie to keep *Voice* alive. She was a special person; had polio all her life and a smile to melt stone. She was killed in a car crash in Zimbabwe. At her funeral I took a stint as pall-bearer, and I never carried a more sorrowful burden.

Tuesdays came to mean high tempers about what the lawyers wanted out and subs wanted in. Once, when the lawyers won, the offending story was replaced with a routine wire service feature about China. The lawyers sighed relief and the subs growled about integrity and relevance. When that week’s banning order arrived, it cited the China story for propagating communism.

Finally, into June, the ban-list included not only the second latest *Voice* as usual but also the four famous words “... and all subsequent editions.”

Hard on its heels, Tutu pitched up for prayer and hymn and pep-talk. He was good in that way. Then we got round to figuring What Now. At least, half the staff did. The rest declared long leave. First step: appeal, though no sane person would bet on our chances.

A young reporter, Tebello Radebe, tentatively said how about submitting pages in advance, for the publications committee to vet. This met yowls of outrage, but nobody had much else in mind. After a while Tebello's idea swam back, to responses varying from reluctant consideration to outright rejection.

Voice proceeded to enjoy its five minutes of fame. Diplomats and journalists wore bare the upholstery in the editor's anteroom. Radio stations in Belize and newspapers in Austria were backing up to speak to Rev. I got calls of a different kind. One was from an office furniture dealer I'd been buying from since Star days.

"I'm very perturbed", he said, "very, very perturbed".

"Gee, Colin", I said, "I didn't know you cared. It's good of you to phone, I appreciate it."

"Yes", he replied, "I'm very, very perturbed. There's nearly R300 on your account".

Everyone and his uncle were giving me the Jonah line: "You go to *World*, and it gets banned. You go to *Voice*, and it gets banned." After a while the best I could muster was a very wan smile. A worthwhile variation came from Tim Wilson, the superintendent of the Alexandra Clinic. He phoned to say: "Hey, I have a good idea, go and work for the *Citizen*."

(The *Citizen*, antidote to the anti-apartheid flavour of the English Press, would soon be exposed as a government front. In the meantime its chief reporter, Gordon Winter, later unmasked as a police spy, had a high time attacking *Voice*.)

When the five minutes faded I was often alone on the premises, with one memorable result.

From protest plays and poems I knew the "anybody" cliché, white inhumanity being proven when a black person answers the phone, "Is Mr Jones there?" "No". "Is Mrs Smith there?" "No." "Oh dear, is anybody there?" In the post-ban *Voice* offices four out of five calls went, Is Mothobi there? Is Sekola there? Is Yoliswa there? Oh dear, is anybody there?

In theory we were composing strategies for a supermeeting,

board plus staff. I was tempted by Tebello's vetting notion, where I had been among outright rejecters and had veered towards reluctant considerers. Was it better to live to fight another day than to die outright? Maybe, yes, probably, depends, but would we hold our heads up?

The Council of Churches had an unassuming monthly called *Kairos*, an ecumenical newspaper, which gave it a nominal commonality with *Voice*, officially a "Black Ecumenical Newspaper". Both *Kairos* and *Voice* had been fathered by John Rees, Tutu's predecessor, and were still funded by the SACC. But *Kairos* was "non-racial", and was edited by a white man, David Thomas. David (later to emigrate to Australia), made a plan to outfox the ban by merging *Voice* with *Kairos*, he and Rev as joint editors.

Up came the big meeting, at the SACC right over the road from *Voice*. I was astounded that many of our staff were entering that portal for the first time. If that was a failing, it was partly my failing. We were meant to pioneer new better ways, new better employment, new better relationships. Now, in death throes, staff and board shared a room for the first time. Was this a new way and better way? Of the half, or so, of each group who had bothered to pitch up, most had never seen each other.

What a meeting. After Joe Mzamane opened with the usual soulful and somewhat rambly prayer, Mike Norton rose to ask if "the staff" may present a petition. Joe agreed, and Mike went into point one, declaring "in the strongest possible terms" that the staff would not work for *Kairos*. Part two, in stronger terms, or at least with more adjectives, objected to money earmarked for a black project being re-routed to a non-racial one.

As was quite common, Tutu became de facto chairman. As was not common, he went, in a word that was not yet cliché, ballistic. He ripped in. The staff had not put tuppence of input into the working-out; who were they to come the bolshies now? Bit by bit the mutiny withered, but on one point the petitioners would not budge, and no staff members dissented from them:

having achieved a “black” identity it was retrogressive to retreat to a “non-racial” one.

Tutu wanted to hear bright ideas for keeping this black entity alive, and we were back to square one. Now, while a pea-soup of rejection and foiled hopes weighted the atmosphere, in trundled Oliver Barrett with beaming face to say all was fixed. He had arranged with the directorate to submit copy for approval.

Here came bedlam. Also solidarity, at last. The staff was ready to crucify Oliver. So was I. There was a tricky question to be worked out, in this; by barging through he had wrecked it. Tutu was outraged – was this a lawyer’s job? Poor Oliver; he was already thinking of an easier life in Australia, I think this day helped him on. I could feel people like Tebello, and Joyce Seroke, director of the YWCA, and Namedi Mphahlele, moderator of the Presbyterians, longing for love and peace. This was supposed to be a nice place, kind and gentle. It was sounding like a pit-bull ring.

Out of the chaos arose the solution. Manas Buthelezi spoke up. Manas had a bucket of structural clout, as president of the SACC. Better, he had inner clout. He spoke seldom, and with effect. The caterwauling silenced. Manas said he was uncomfortable about asking for approval, “May we print this article, may we print this letter”, but he had no worries sending them what we had printed and saying, “Here’s what we have, if you want to ban it, ban it now.”

This was genius. The Directorate thought so, too. By the time our appeal came up, June 16 was over. Its fireworks had been muted. The temperature was down. We proposed a condition of appeal: we’d courier copies to Cape Town before we distributed. On this condition, we won. Thereafter, each Tuesday night copies were on the midnight plane. The directorate obligingly got its committee to sit at an unearthly hour once a week and ban or non-ban by telephone.

This was new and historic censorship practice, and rather eye-blinking. Firstly, it was probably not legal. It is eminently

doubtful that the Act permitted what the enforcers of the Act were now doing the better to achieve the objectives of the Act. Parties to an issue were working out a solution by commonsense rather than by statute. That was great, in my view, but not, um, normal.

Secondly, we had skirted the edge of, but not fallen in to, a more radical novelty. Officially, South Africa has never had “censorship” – i.e., an official standing behind the editor’s chair. It has had “publications control” – i.e., thwack the offender after the offence. Indeed, the Publications Committee formally warned us off using the term “Censors” (an outrageous interpretation of the law, but lost in the flood). The approval idea clearly meant “censorship”. Had we gone ahead with that, we would have made a brand of legal history that nobody wanted.

The appeal deal ended our banning hassles like dew in sunlight. Four editions in a row were approved with not a hiccup. Had we subtly blunted our pen? I couldn’t see it. By the fourth edition I thought we were fiercer than ever. Staff were getting desperate. The banning phase had been ruinous to life expectancy but it was fantastic for street cred. Previously I couldn’t sleep on Thursday nights, dreading Friday’s banning. Now I couldn’t sleep on Tuesday nights, dreading Wednesday’s approval.

We had to get into the NPU, where only the Minister of Justice could ban us. *Voice* had been applying since before I arrived. At first it was thwarted by technicalities, later by bannings, and the mood was certainty that the white establishment would never let a dark parvenu in. But now here we were, squeaky clean and smelling of roses, establishment-wise. We tried again and got a new response: please come and meet the executive.

The NPU offices on September 13, 1978, set a record for the body-language of “meetings”. Five NPU people sat at a raised dais. In the middle was Hal Miller, now managing director of the Argus company and president of the NPU. Alongside: vice-president Duimpie Opperman, chairman of what was

presumed to be the more hard-line of the Afrikaans press groups, Perskor.

Below, occupying the front row of an otherwise empty auditorium, were Revelation, chief reporter Phil Mtimkulu, myself, and acting manager Bernard Kgantsi. (Zakes had vanished during a night of many arrests, later to acquire asylum in Switzerland).

The four of us looked and felt like defendants peering up at a magistrate. We were wearing suits and ties and polished shoes. Hal delivered a sermon on good behaviour and Duimpie added a codicil. In theory we should have bristled but in practice we wore our best shit-eating grins. When we came away we were NPU members. We had come in my car, which was decorated with a parking ticket. Rev plucked the ticket away and *Voice* paid it. For the first time and the last, a perk!

Now, exempt from the Publications Committees, we were in the less capricious hands of the Press Council with its less dire powers. It could make us publish apologies or pay compensation. The chairman, Judge Oscar Galgut, was renowned for both fierceness and fairness but personally I knew more about the former. As Acting Judge President when I was a judge's clerk, he had kicked me out of the judges' parking lot. I prepared a righteous law-student appeal with Latin phrases and Roman-Dutch principles to say that since no-one else was using the bay, I may as well. He listened to half of it and responded without proper citation of judicial precedent: "You're a cheeky little bugger".

It was a Wednesday that we were admitted to the NPU. Thursday at the office was a day of euphoria, and some reevaluating of the permanent intractable hostility of the white establishment. On the Friday Galgut phoned. He introduced himself and asked for the editor and Mabel took fright. So did Rev; in trouble already? He took the call and Galgut said: "Will you visit me for tea?"

Rev arranged that I would go with him. I suppose we expected a lecture, but it didn't look like a vicious one. We missed the

scheduled meeting because my first child was being born. Rev apologetically worried that this was a black mark against us. When we got there, Galgut spent half the meeting being grandfatherly and the other half telling Rev how glad he was to have new independent voices emerging.

Rev was bowled over, and there was stir at the office. Most people had not imagined there could be authority figures who weren't automatically down on us. A young reporter said to me: "I sometimes wonder if the government really is all evil". Galgut wouldn't consider himself "the government" but from the reporter's point of view authority was authority, all one thing, white men with power.

Other heresies were coming up, too, such as mumblings about "wallowing in the mental ghettos of Black Consciousness" and about when the time would come to work on positives instead of harping on negatives. These were whispers, though, coming disproportionately to me as the resident outsider. In meetings, the orthodox complexes deepened, dissidents huddling in silence. Therein is the one big plus of the route I tread: when you have no-one's line to toe, you toe no-one's but your own.

Voice had never been the world's best journal, and it got worse. Tensions, ideological and other, ate the place. The view spread that it would have been best to go out with glory. From the start there'd been downs at the *Voice*, but balanced by terrific ups. A year later, the downs were winning.

My main reward was the township agents who sold the paper. Most of these guys had as much interest in fossil formations as in the tortured issues of blackness and purity that cursed the office. One, Ntsizi Moremi in Sebokeng, set up a network of practical go-ahead. No-one had ever told him about "community projects", he'd just done it. Apart from selling *Voice*, he arranged vegetable gardens and a marketing system and sewing co-ops. This was as good a good-news story as I ever saw. But word got round the cocktail circuit and next thing his dusty track was full of long cars and TV cameras. Then

there was a sponsored combi, and then another, and then the combis were crashed and the bickering drowned the sounds of industry and Ntsizi – and more particularly his wife Seipati – were slipping out of kilter.

One day I found a bag on my doorstep. It had a figurine of an old man on his haunches holding a stick, and a letter from Ntsizi: he was fine, he was in Kenya, (no address), he was working for the ANC. “May God bless you and Geal and new waited member of family. Be a male – conquer in struggle. Be a female – Ambassador of liberation.”

That upset me. Ntsizi belonged here. He was making South Africa work. He belonged with the guys who, like Swift said, get two blades of grain to grow where one grew before. Distortions had driven him away, distortions had messed him up. What dumb distortions we had. Would they end when times changed, or just change shape?

It wasn't only Ntsizi. There were beautiful people. I quote you one random letter, in full, from Chabedi Pooe in Sebokeng:

Dear Sir,

I'm happy to write this letter to you sir. I'm happy I'm still going well with paper than the time I started. I'm still progresing well by selling and I think I can be greatful if I can get bicycle in order to deliver a paper in many other places.

My reason for jotting down is I receive papers late and sometimes I didn't receive some pluck cards and some few of plastic covers of pluck cards were also not received. I did ask Mr Zakes through phone that when posting a paper he must also post some INVOICE but/and I didn't receive. Please sir I want you to advice me as certain policeman is against me when selling a paper. Before I forget, please send me some Official Envelopes to post your money or advice what to do because I aint got it presently. Your favourably concideration will be highly appreciated if you can send me the Requirement of certain objects.

Not forgetting to pass my regards to your family particulally the knew born.

That was standard. Those people made it worthwhile.

In October '78 the "management structure" was as well up as I could get it. It was time for me to move on. I drew up a letterhead calling myself "Labour Consultant", figuring I'd work out what that entailed. The main manne in the reporters' room gradually dispersed. Sekola Sello became sports editor of *Drum*. Phil Mtimkulu became president of MWASA, the black journalists' union, had a stretch in jail, and became a university professor. Bernard went back to JCI whence he had come, and turned up later, under the forename Moroe, as chairman of the SA golfers' association. *Voice* limped on for another year, until no-one knew why it was there or what it was doing.

My ex-secretary and co-retrenchee from *World*, Nomavenda Mathiane, went to Nafcoc. She had become a columnist at *Voice*, but I hadn't been in particularly close contact with her. We were surprised and touched when she greeted the birth of our "knew born" with a poetic column urging us to call the baby Nomathemba – Born of Hope, or Mother of Hope colloquially. We made that her third name, and made Nomavenda a godmother.

6

Milking Sheds

MY CAREER AS “CONSULTANT” CONSISTED OF ONE COMMISSION. Ted Scales was managing director of *Drum* magazine, the most renowned local black periodical. He wanted a plan for an educational supplement. Jim Bailey, *Drum*’s inimitable proprietor, thereupon decided I was a “Drum Man” and I got the traditional “Drum Man” treatment – viz, invitation to Jim’s exquisite farm near Broederstroom, man-to-man stroll through the woods, irresistible job offer somewhere near the milking sheds.

I was “Group Assistant Editor”. I didn’t know what that meant, nor did Jim. Jim wanted an intention of permanent fealty. I was scratchy about “black” publishing and wanting fullness, people, not blacks or whites. This was December and I was going to America in April, on one of Uncle Sam’s handy expense-paid tours for foreign journalists. Jim was sure that by then I’d be a life-long *Drum* devotee. I was sure that by then he’d have swallowed my ideas for an “all South

African” publication – a thing he most certainly wasn’t doing at the milking shed – and would be liberating a hunk of his legendary income to make it work. Jim’s father, the randlord Sir Abe Bailey, left a trust which sixty years later still delivered Jim a quarterly cheque, giving everyone in the media industry the repeated opportunity to explain how they would change the world if they had so much money.

Jim did in fact change the world. He was a rare African, genuinely interested in cross-continental solidarity and the welfare of the whole lot. His aim was “Life More Abundant” across Africa, and although you can debate how much his three publishing empires achieved – in Nigeria, Kenya, and South Africa – that was an aim to respect. If nothing else, the three *Drums* got millions of people reading. (An uncle of mine, who became a rural Africophile when his own uncle was plumed-hat governor of Nyasaland, told me it was normal for a *Drum* to be read by a hundred people. It was all there was, and it circulated until the pages disintegrated).

One part of Group Assistant Editor was running *True Love*, a women’s monthly which sold fifty thousand copies largely on the strength of James Hadley Chase serials. Also, Jim wanted a set of Pan-African surveys in which he was sure that his old wartime comrades, like Sir Val Duncan, chairman of Rio Tinto, would advertise vastly. To me fell the lousy task of apprising Jim that wartime memories were shorter than he thought.

Ted Scales meanwhile roped me in to creating *Drum*’s motoring section, *Drum Wheels*. He muttered when I spent time on Jim’s projects and vice versa. The two were anyhow en route to a fall-out. When Ted left I hadn’t yet been paid for the original education plan, and this became a running sore. Jim finally paid me half my fee and I was solidly disaffected. Jim was notoriously tight-fisted, which I don’t think was stingy nature so much as that when you have that much folding stuff you’re super-sensitive to abuse.

One weird result was that at lunch at the Rand Bar & Restaurant the exploited hacks knew in advance that the richest

person most of us would ever meet had accidentally left his wallet at the office. Somebody always paid up, unresentfully. That was Jim. That was also the Rand Bar & Restaurant. Cash on the nail or your kneecaps were in danger. There were twelve items on the menu but in truth your choices were two: Portuguese steak and beer or plain steak and beer. Either way you got a sauce that made your palate explode. The difference was that with plain steak the sauce came in a side bowl. If the bowl got pushed under your nostrils it took two minutes before you could finish your sentence. The main clientele were mechanics in grease-streaked overalls who passed up the steak and compensated in beer and looked skeef at anyone talking larny. Once we arrived as a taxi was disgorging an immaculate American who'd asked for the Rand Club. He goggled like he'd been smacked with a wet fish. We put him right. The taxi driver was a Mozambique immigrant for whom the Rand Bar was bigger than the stately Rand Club a mile downtown, whose members would no more catch a common taxi than dance a tango on the pavement.

Jim was in his element at the Rand Bar – next best thing to a shebeen. I went back some ten years later for old time's sake, but the place was all smoothed up.

I hung out at *Drum* until the time came for the American trip. Jim kept telling me I was a “Drum Man”, which was odd because he simultaneously vetoed all my projects except one, ironically, Ted's idea of *Drum Wheels*. Jim wanted me to drop my idea of a non-racial magazine – “silly, Denis, silly” was his catchphrase – and I still wanted him to put up the cash. We both failed.

Jim finally registered that I wouldn't return to *Drum* after six weeks in the States, and got mad, which was his worst habit.

He was an engagingly eccentric employer and a fascinating character. He and Harry Oppenheimer had started life with silver spoons of comparable caratage, and had chosen different directions. Unto Harry were talents given and he multiplied them, creating industry and employment mightily. Jim got his

nachas when he made space for a Henry Nxumalo or a Casey Motsisi to appear from nowhere and write words of genius. Rational judgment is that Harry was the success and Jim the prodigal, but I appreciated Jim's one-man extremity on the compass of human diversity.

It was a pity that his world divided into blue-eyed boys and snakes in the grass. Every new "Drum Man" was a blue-eyed boy until he became a snake in the grass, and when I went off to America I was snake, undiluted. Which made the trip quite a con. I travelled under the style of "Group Assistant Editor, Drum Publications", which sounded better than "Guy trying to Establish Outlandish Magazine", but was in truth past-tense.

I took a prospectus for the outlandish magazine, whose working title was *Africa Vision*, and got to feel like Dick Whittington wondering what happened to the gold on London's pavements. America was supposed to be full of zillionaires burning to support noble ventures like raised thinking in Africa and the breaking of the chains of race, but the zillionaires didn't seem to have read the script.

One Foundation listened as I explained the need for whites, too, to see a future in one-man-one-vote, and then said: "Aw, shoot. You guys had your turn for 300 years. Now just give over and get out of the way."

My biggest hope was a bank in Wall Street, and this visit I planned to a T. I examined the map and calculated. I was sixty blocks away. I'd go to the terrifying expense of a taxi, to eradicate the possibility of erring on public transport. I worked out the time a six-block drive would take in rush-hour Joburg. I multiplied by 10. Then I added a whole 50% margin. And it wasn't even rush-hour. I was buttoned-up. I looked forward to impressing my dad with the tale; his view of my time-planning skills needed correction.

Except, the rules don't hold. I now know that every hour is rush hour in Manhattan. I now know that taking a taxi for a 60-block trip is like choosing a teaspoon to dig a ditch. I learned those things on one taxi trip.

When I finished apologising, the bank guys sat me down to hear how *Africa Vision* was going to make South Africa a better country. I sang my song and the chief guy said: “If I understand you correctly, it sounds like you are advocating majority rule in South Africa.”

“Oh yes,” I said, pleased to have been at last located on the side of the angels.

“Well,” he said, “this company would see that approach as enemy action”.

I’ve worried ever since about the career path of the junior vice-president who had invited me.

Journalistically and humanly and so forth, the America trip was terrific. Funds-wise ... well, I returned to Johannesburg with cash in my pocket but not in the league I had foreseen. I had a \$50 subscription cheque from Freedom House, and I had husbanded to excess my \$50 a day allowance from Uncle Sam.

The outlook could not be described as dazzling, but I was perversely more set on my course, not less. Aside from wanting a forum that was not “for blacks” or “for whites” as readers, I believed I had graduated into a next-phase as well, wanting an exploring of ideas that were not “pro-black” or “pro-white” as concepts. For three months I worked from home, sending out proposals and budgets. Some were politely rejected, some were impolitely rejected, most got no reply. By mid August the kitty was low. My daughter’s first birthday was coming up. I psyched myself into acknowledging defeat and looking for a job. Gael appreciated that, no two ways. And I appreciated her saying: give it till the end of the month, last chance.

Then Desmond Tutu phoned. He had been thinking about this thing I wanted to do; would I care to call on him? Very soon after that I had a loan, R10 000, the biggest cheque I’d ever seen.

Just before the launch of the first issue, my new baby got a new name. I was never wholly sold on *Africa Vision*. It felt too “good”, like we would only see plucky struggling-against-adversity Africa and ignore the stupendous spread of human

cock-up. I wanted to be the front line of where things got argued out, and hankered for the name *Frontline*.

At that time there were no Frontline journals anywhere in the world, that I could find. There was no Frontline Bar Services, no Frontline Stage Rentals, no Frontline Recruitment, no Frontline Tick & Flea Powder. Frontline wasn't a word yet, except in South Africa, where it had one and one only very specific meaning. The hostile ring of Z-states north of us – Mozambique, Zambia, Tanzania, Zaire – were the Frontline states. To christen a journal *Frontline* was to state: “please, please, please, give us a banning order”.

So, too bad. Tony produced several *Africa Vision* mock-ups. We'd picked out a font and a style. It felt alright, though it didn't feel right.

Who should come to our aid but the government itself – in the person of its most public face, Foreign Minister Pik Botha.

Pik made a widely reported speech containing the phrase: “South Africa is THE Frontline state”.

We leapt. The first words in *Frontline*, Vol 1, No 1, were Pik Botha's quote, loud and clear for the ~~censors~~ publications controllers to see before they saw anything else.



Broke Baronet

PIETER LE ROUX OPENS HIS CHAPTER IN 'A FUTURE SOUTH Africa' by quoting the British philosopher Anthony Giddins to the effect that man does indeed shape his destiny, but not in the way he thinks and not with the results he intends.

That sums up *Frontline*. I shaped it, alright, but into none of the things I thought it would be, starting with prosperous.

The idea was a hangover from those long discussions with John Marquard about de-racialising World. *Frontline* was going to be the most raceless journal there ever was. It would reflect and forge the new South Africa where nobody would notice complexion. It would be the meeting place for everyone from Crimplene Grieta in Brakpan to Sophie Mthetwa at the mealie-stand. It was going to deal objectively and non-racially with the issues of the day, so clearly and readably that no South African with half a brain could afford to miss it. It was going to be the nucleus of the rising press barony – well, baronetcy anyhow – of the eighties, and after a short spell of temporary belt-tightening

I would step into the role of the baronet concerned, calmly directing an efficient operation from a quietly opulent office and raising the quality of the nation's information.

On September 3, 1979, Gael and I and our neighbours Harry and Denny Watson-Smith, now in Australia, packed a table and two chairs into the Watson-Smith's combi and carted them to Dunwell building in Jorissen Street, Braamfontein.

Braamfontein in 1979 was the capital of dissidence and Jorissen street was the holy of holies. At the west end was Tramway House, home of half a dozen left-wing outfits and the reddest above-ground building in the country. At the east end was the Johannesburg City Council, about as red as Margaret Thatcher but the most powerful non-Nationalist public entity in SA. Between was a long frontage of Wits, the University of the Witwatersrand, which was in permanent contest with the University of Cape Town to be more anti-apartheid than thou.

The main gate to the university – an underpass running beneath the Chemistry building – was the endpoint of campus protest meetings.

Students would gather on the library lawn, deep inside campus, and work up a heat. So far so good, safe and sound. They'd start to march to town to make their case known. They got as far as the Jorissen Street gate and there they'd find large numbers of policemen standing around twirling sjamboks, and a couple of dozen police vehicles, from brigadiers' staff cars to tank-like things suitable for invading Stalingrad. Something in the air around the gate stimulated acute memory surges, reminding students of outstanding assignments. But a few hundred would remain, while leaders with megaphones debated the pros and cons of further advance.

I was sometimes there in my journalist hat, but more often I was there because I parked at the west end of Jorissen Street, where there were no meters. I'd be on my way to my car and I'd see a pending headbusting and I'd listen, and I'd get encouraged, mostly. Whatever public catastrophes were happening in education – the Lost Generation created constant

media caterwauling – these kids were bold and genuine and bright and good.

Of course, this moment wasn't the moment that the disaffected were rampaging through laboratories and upturning desks and rubbish-bins, when one tended to see things differently. But when they were debating whether to go forth and get their heads bust for freedom, they tended to be impressively reflective.

Their head-bust strategy was terrible, though. In my day, the rule had been: sit down. I think we got it from America, like "We Shall Overcome." My first arrest (of two; neither dramatic) was that way. It was the first full-scale illegal march, in 1970, and we were in sight of John Vorster Square before the police got into gear. When they charged, we sat, on the sound grounds that they'd find it harder to break our skulls.

By the eighties the police got you at the Wits gate, and then students ran. Why? I dunno. The police on the whole ran faster than the students, and perceived catching a fleeing dissident as automatic head-break licence.

The Wits gate was the most visible site of Jorissen Street dissidence but the most influential was three blocks east; the Council of Churches' Diakonia House, the fiercest (unbanned) thorn in the government's side. Opposite Diakonia, forty or more liberal/lefty outstations hung out in Dunwell and its neighbours, Portland Place and Geldenhuys. One block south, in De Korte Street, was the Institute of Race Relations, flagship of traditional liberalism. A block east of that was the Mineworkers Union, the unchallenged bastion of the extreme right.

MWU, SAIRR and SACC made an isosceles triangle; they were close enough that they could have shouted to each other, or more likely at each other, had there been no buildings between.

It would be nice to say that Braamfontein was a microcosm of the nation, but that's not true, insofar as most of the nation was more interested in watching Dallas or collecting firewood or drinking beer than in all three of these hotbeds of thought

put together. Better, Braamfontein was the nation's greenhouse of socio-pol ideas. It had all the extremes plus the official opposition's main redoubt.

So it also had the Special Branch. By then we were supposed to say "Security Police", so of course "Special Branch" was set in stone, and when we passed the ultra-fortified "import agency" above the German husband-and-wife camera repairers we'd show people where the Special Branch were.

Jorissen Street was used to its rare brand of local sights. Overnight, once every few months, the Diakonia side parking bays were occupied by traffic cops and portable no-parking signs. We knew that some time in the day there would be a bellowing of sirens and a motorcade would swoop up, motorbikes at the front, blue lights flashing, a police car or two, a plain black tinted-windscreen job, then a super-special imported model as long as two hearses. The big car would halt at Diakonia, and from the back emerged the President of Bavaria, Foreign Minister of Ivory Coast, Crown Prince of Norway, or Kabaka of Buganda, being given maximum government co-operation to visit Bishop Tutu, who the government simultaneously treated as Public Enemy Number One.

At a slightly lesser frequency the same parking places were full from very early in the morning with white or pale-green Opels. What you then did was, you checked shoes. Legend had it that white shoes were high fashion among the Special Branch, and I can vouch that when the street was full of Opels the pavements saw lots of white men with white shoes, and at some time in the day a (white) Mercedes would pull up and three men in (grey) suits would alight, waving search warrants which they may proceed to serve on Tutu but more probably on Beyers Naude of the Christian Institute, who had an office in Tutu's building.

I moved into an office euphemistically called "Suite 402, Dunwell." I didn't know what was a suite about this. It was four short walls with a window overlooking Jorissen Street. Ravan Press, in its heyday as South Africa's lefty publishing house,

had the north wing of the same floor and was run by Mike and Marilyn Kirkwood. They came over to bid welcome and Marilyn looked around sceptically. “You’re going to produce a magazine? From here? Forget it. There’ll never be a copy.” Mike was more optimistic: of course there’ll be one, he said, but not a second. Nonetheless he whipped out his chequebook and took the first regular annual subscription. (Freedom House had been a consolation prize, really, though appreciated.) How much, said Mike? I made it up then and there: R6.00, 60 cents a copy and subscriber’s discount. I’d intended to make it 50c but Nthato Motlana was doing me a column, which was quite a coup, and he insisted that the cover price be more than *Drum*.

I said that after the hundredth copy Mike could have a free subscription for life. He didn’t make it. Despite my steady departure from orthodox anti-apartheid to a maverick status of which he amiably disapproved, he kept up his subs for six or seven years, but then he left for England and we lost contact.

Of the first five subscribers, only my parents renewed all the way. Jacky Bosman was the art director of the *Financial Mail* and a blessed supporter until she went to Sydney and put Africa behind her. Of Vita Palestrant, *Rand Daily Mail* consumer editor, can the identical phrase be repeated.

The fifth, Cedric Mayson, was just out of jail and visited 402 by mistake. It had been the Christian Institute. He gave me a lecture on the importance of opposing the Boers at all times and in every way and then doled out his six rands in cash. This was a seminal moment for me. I knew as I received it that I was going to disappoint him. In my mind I was 100% anti-apartheid, meaning 100% opposed to all evasions of black citizenship. It was a jolt to realise that Cedric, and many Cedrics, would hardly recognise that as anti-apartheid; it involved little villainy and less retribution.

I looked for a printer and found the Mafeking Mail. I liked its 100-year history, I liked its small-town roots, I liked its prices, I liked its boss, Joe Podbrey (who I later learned was born into Struggle credentials). Printer, fixed.

I looked for advertisers and I learned a thesaurus of synonyms for “No”. Was this to be a political publication, everybody wanted to know? Well, er, yes. I saw shutters drop, leaving a tiny crack at the edge: what politics? Reform politics, was the answer to widen the crack. But it wasn’t an answer I could give. Reform was going nowhere. Reform was the huge wrangle about by which of the 5,000 available ways should blacks advance from non-citizen status to half-citizen status.

I’d explain, so-o politely, so-o earnestly. We had to start with full-citizen status, or we just had endless sabotage and illegitimising until we got there; and to start there we had to bypass black-man-wins-means-white-man-loses. I explained until I was hoarse. All that sank in was: this treacherous person is against reform. I’d hear, “But, Mr Beckett, is this pro-black or pro-white?” I’d explain again, backward, from the door.

The last week of November, Vol.1 No.1 was ready for the printers but with a single advertisement and that one phony, for my beloved vintage-lookalike Jaguar. I’d tried every known Opposition company.

I hadn’t tried Rembrandt, the liquor and tobacco empire. Stood to reason; they were Nat. But ... three years back, the time of People’s College, Rembrandt had come in on that. More, one of their guys came to visit. I’d walked him through works, through editorial, through our proud new troublemaker canteen with no European and Non-European signs or even subtle hedgerow room-dividers, and he hadn’t blanched at all. That time, I was selling education. This time, a polemical magazine directly critical of Nat policy. For this time I could only see a big No looming. But Panic Season had arrived. Pages 1 – 39 were ready to go. I was proud of them (not least the page with a Nat defending the Nat case: Stoffel van der Merwe, later to be Minister of Nearly Everything.) But page 40 was a glaring blank, and advertising income was the roundest figure - o.

On Saturday, December 1, our sixth wedding anniversary, I was to give Joe Podbrey the complete material. On the Thursday I gritted my teeth and paged through three-years-back’s diary.

I found a name, Willem Malherbe. I crossed fingers, phoned Stellenbosch, and asked for Mr Malherbe.

I did not know that this procedure, in the eyes of informed persons in media finance, was tantamount to phoning heaven and asking for God. Malherbe controlled the nation's biggest marketing budget. You thought of him in hushed tones. If I'd known I might have frozen wholly. As it was I bumbled and babbled my readership targets and projected profile over the phone.

Malherbe focused on one question: did I firmly believe my objectives were in the better interests of South Africa? I said Oh yes, absolutely, no doubt about that, though his political advisers may not agree... He cut me off: "I didn't ask you what other people think. I asked what you believe."

Friday morning, my back page belonged to Chesterfield cigarettes. Chesterfield stayed for five years. When it left, it was to make way for Rembrandt's major brands – Peter Stuyvesant and Rothman's, alternating. That was promotion, people told me.

Rembrandt in my eyes were paragons. They never missed, despite my increasingly terrible deadline-keeping, bad salesmanship and monkeying with schedules (usually by abolishing months but once by adding an extra).

Back in the circles of Johannesburg orthodoxy, *Frontline* remained suspect, contentious, risky. I do not imply that politics alone kept my finances from flowering. I screwed up more than the carpenters on Noah's Ark. Then again, I might have screwed up less were I not carrying this anvil.

For the first few editions Tony Sutton and I sneaked to *Drum's* offices at nights and weekends and brought pages to camera-ready form. In my mind *Drum* had done me down on the education job and I was taking my due in kind.

At *Drum*, Tony was not your classic "editorial director", standing on guard in case the Natives get restless. He was a design junkie, obsessed with getting right words in right place with right pictures and right headlines.

He got into *Frontline* out of that and friendship, and took

a terrific pride in it. He and I fought like wild dogs from start to end, and fired each other from time to time, once for a full six months, but always came back with mutual relief until he emigrated to Canada. Even then he couldn't entirely kick the habit, and faxed off violent diatribes about the editorial and especially artistic flaws of each edition received in Toronto, where he was becoming a world-league guru. *Frontline* may not live in South Africa any more but it will live a long time yet in North America as an illustrative centrepiece in his book, *Creative Magazine Design*.

Circulation shot up to 11,000 in no time, and then stayed put for years. Awards and prizes came and went, and in terms of journalism awards per staff members *Frontline* must have an all-time record. Some of these awards carried fat cheques, and the theory was that winners were meant to use the money for mind-uplifting foreign travel. The reality in my case was that the cheques invariably went into the bottomless pit of printers' bills, more than once providing a last-minute salvation and staving off the bankruptcy court.

The Stellenbosch Farmers Winery ran the main award – the SFW National Award for Enterprising Journalism, which was a hang of a mouthful and I suppose it's their fault that it was usually described as "South Africa's Pulitzer", although I always bridled that we had to borrow an American appellation to describe a South African activity. On one occasion when the SFW flew the family first-class to Cape Town to put us up in the Mount Nelson, the queen mother of South African hotels, I asked if I couldn't pass up on the travel and accommodation and take the cash instead. They weren't biting but at the banquet I won two awards, including the overall prize. This put R6,000 in my pocket, which is what I had paid myself for the first two years of *Frontline*'s existence, and was R51, plus some cents, more than the printers were currently due. It was like a gift from Above; these cheques were untouchable.

Next morning, the sacred cheques in my top pocket, I stepped off the plane at Bloemfontein airport and hitch-hiked to a garage

in the Free State dorp of Zastron, where my car had seized three weeks previously. Gael and children flew on to Johannesburg. I was getting long in the tooth to stand on country roads with a raised thumb. Motorists who look benignly upon an 18-year-old hitch-hiker look differently upon one of 35; they assume a bum or a meths-drinker or a jailbird or all three. New cars and smart cars and safe-looking middle-class families left me in dust and I got to Zastron by courtesy of jalopies.

This was altruistic lift-giving, ignoring your passenger until he says “I’ll get out here, thanks”; purer than my brand, which cross-examines the hitcher in the hope of gleaning insights. I was also left wondering how often someone who on Friday won his industry’s main award spent Saturday hitching to a backyard mechanic’s repair of his broken car.

One of the dumber ways I sought to rectify the cash scarcity was columnising. For a while I was doing a weekly column for *Beeld* and a monthly for the *Sunday Times* and a fortnightly for the *Sowetan*. My logic was to allay advertisers’ fears by appearing acceptable, though I confess also to a temptation to sound off. In *Frontline* itself I was cautious about sounding off. (Well, I thought so, not all readers agreed).

The columns meant recognition of a sort although not such as to bowl the bank manager over. Some people could write columns in half a day or even an hour, but I couldn’t and still can’t. When I finally quit the *Sunday Times*, the editor and assistant editor, Tertius Myburgh and Fleur de Villiers, took me to a slap-up lunch at Harridans to persuade me to stay on. I was half persuaded but then I calculated that the lunch bill came to three times as much as the new-and-improved rate they were offering for what usually took a 12-hour day to write, and revolted.

Moreover these columns were problematic in that as I saw it my job in *Beeld* was to tell Afrikaners why they ought to drop apartheid and my job in the *Sowetan* was to tell blacks why Afrikaners were nervous about dropping apartheid. This caused Percy Qoboza, by now editor of *City Press*, to guffaw his

heartiest of guffaws and say, “You’re uniting South Africans, all right. We unitedly think you’re a jerk. Try putting your *Beeld* column in the *Sowetan* and your *Sowetan* column in *Beeld*.”

I eventually did a column for *City Press* too, but not for long and it ended unhappily. This column, like the others, was meant to be free and unchained. With the others, that worked. Suspicious anti-Nats couldn’t believe that *Beeld* allowed me to say whatever anti-Nat things I liked, but allow me they did. Ton Vosloo, the editor, jibbed once, when I’d called the homelands “joke states”, and he jibbed in a very upright fashion. He phoned to argue that however much I disapproved of the homelands, I didn’t need to insult the people who were battling to succeed with schooling and water supply, and I agreed to a softening.

At *City Press*, Percy gritted his teeth and swallowed diverse heresies. But the UDF, de facto the ANC’s new internal wing, was supposed to be holy, and when I wrote a piece on the treatment of a musician named Ray Phiri at the hands of its not-yet-notorious Cultural Desk or thought-police, lo, my piece vanished. Nobody said “Sorry, we won’t run this.” First I knew was when *City Press* came out on Sunday with an unexplained filler in my slot. Naturally I gave them the same piece for next week, and it was the same story, and then again. I raised it with Percy and he got curt and I got curt and the air got cold and one of my abiding regrets is that it stayed that way even until Percy died on his 50th birthday.

If my columns came across combative – “veglustig”, belligerent, was how *Beeld* described them – that was a far sight from the truth. Fight was the last thing I lusted for and I was only combative in the cause of peace. There was a flaw at the core, a missing link somewhere. People who wanted peace weren’t finding it. Let alone SA, Turks were dondered in Kurdistan and Kurds were dondered in Turkey. Tibetans were suppressed in Tibet and Fijians were suppressed in Fiji. Half the world was a dancefloor for the Tyrants’ Tango and half the rest was a frying-pan on simmer.

Technology had advanced light years but human relations

remained a blunt instrument especially when humans varied creed and culture. Was there not a key, like tungsten had been the key to lighting and silicon to computers?

My first published article, in Durban's Sunday Tribune in 1969, was from a youth symposium and was headlined, "Thanks, mom and dad, for the woeful world you're handing us." When I read the headline I wondered if my children would one day write that sort of article under that headline. Would their children? Wasn't there a way to de-woe the woes?

For *Frontline* the cause was clear: de-woe. The method was clear: end apartheid. Only the route was a little bit off track – listen to the Righties instead of yelling at them from afar.

The trouble was that when you spend enough time listening to a guy it becomes hard to see him as all wrong. At first, *Frontline* had just a couple of mild heresies at the edges. Bit by bit the heresies became less mild and the edges more central. Also the costs more painful: the only time, I think, that I burst out crying real wet tears on a business-type issue was when Tutu summarily called up his previously patient R10 000. I walked out of his office as a zombie. In the corridor a colleague of his, Bernard Spong, looked at me in alarm and said "are you alright?" And the floodgates opened. I bawled like a baby while Bernard comforted me and staff walked past in embarrassment.

The turning point on this route was when *The Star* sent my friend Langa Skosana to cover a meeting of the Mineworkers' Union. The miners turned him away and there was a hue and cry about racism. I wrote a piece saying it was the miners' party, if they didn't want him at it they didn't have to have him.

This introduced me to the phenomenon of protest by subscription cancellation. It was one thing to humour the racists by letting them have their shout but now I was backing them up; irresponsible.

I didn't apologise. The world was full of people being burned, maimed, assaulted, brutalised, belittled, ruined, for being the wrong colour in the wrong place at the wrong time. That was the ill, not Langa forfeiting tea and biscuits. Could it be

that if the racists were allowed their uniraical tea and biscuits there'd be less burning and belittling? Surely there was a better way to brotherly love than pistol-point? Could there be a life beyond anti-apartheid, a "post-anti-apartheid", or "after post-apartheid", where people lived in harmony without necessarily pretending to colour-blindness?

While these questions tumbled in my mind, the question I most often had to answer came to look ever more wrong: "Are you for the whites or for the blacks?"

Once at the Union of Jewish Women – toughest taskmasters in town, weekly meetings, no wriggling off their hook, and for thanks they gave you an envelope with two ten-rand notes – I argued that the ANC were entitled to see equal citizenship as the dawn of legitimacy, and the Conservatives were entitled to want a community life unswamped. An old lady afterwards gave great thanks and enthusiasm and said, "The only thing is, I don't know if you are for Mr Treurnicht or for Mr Mandela." There you have it. Who are you "for"? Not what are you for? I was "for" changing the basis by which directions were determined. This was not a "for" that anyone recognised.

Frontline tottered forth, dropping drips of the slowly crystallising gospel according to Beckett into the minds of a select, which is a nice word for small, readership. But while this pursuit became my own main mission it mercifully did not, yet, stunt *Frontline's* increasingly nice reputation for rounding up worthwhile contributors.

Freelancers were the name of the game and *Frontline's* were eclectic. Some – blacks especially – got the mainstream press excited. Around 300 *Frontline* articles were re-published by someone else, a thing I could never get straight in my mind. I'd spend an eternity beating and bashing a freelance contributor into refining a piece of work, and often after the tenth or so draft rewrite it myself, and then the *Cape Times* or *The Star*, or occasionally the *Spectator* or *Algemeine Zeitung*, would phone and offer fifty rand to lift it. This was good for getting-on-the-map, though the big introductory REPUBLISHED FROM

FRONTLINE MAGAZINE credit-line that we agreed on often ended up as a tiny mystery (*Frontline*) tacked on to the end. But it cheated readers. Why subscribe to a small journal when much of it appeared in big ones that you read anyway? Still, when a metropolitan editor rang to bespeak this article or that, I mainly succumbed – vanity, maybe – and divided the fee with the author.

Real income was advertisements. A full-page ad might bring in more than fifty annual subs, or twenty-odd lifting fees, and the advertising world was almost at the point of the great breakthrough, always.

Then, late in 1982 a strong young rugger-bugger came to my office and announced that he was going make both of us rich by selling ad-space.

I didn't know Paul Hofmeyr, though his family were famed as high achievers of the first water. Paul's main achievement so far had been full-back for Transvaal. Now he was going to succeed in a new way. *Frontline* was the vehicle. I said he was crazy; he'd soon be impaled on the political petard. He said no, quality will out. Anyway he was going to start a rugby magazine, too, and that would balance things; nothing's more patriotic than rugby. I said give it a go. Don't expect a salary but take a fat commission.

Paul gave it a go. I'd underestimated him; he didn't get as far as he'd thought but he got a long way further than I'd thought.

Most of our ads were “socially responsible” – which is to say not so much selling something to someone but showing the world that the company was a good citizen. Typically, a cute black child and a cute white child shared a sandwich or a swing. I appreciated these ads, make no mistake, and was 100% on board the sentiments. But often they were so cutesy they could make your eyes cross.

One was truly brilliant; a spread from Control Data. Page 1 was a model bicycle made from scraps of wire, a thing that black kids made fluently while their white contemporaries were working out how to open the Lego box. Page 2 was a

young man and his delivery bike at an evocative smalltown butchery – Marikana Slaghuis, Posbus 272, Tel 10. “At the age of ten Elias Mudau designed a bicycle,” said the ad, “now he rides one.” It was a punt for Control Data’s education-by-computer programme, and a lifeline for *Frontline*. Throughout infancy, that ad was our biggest source of income.

I was agonised when a cartoonist in Cape Town sent me a parody that said Elias would do better to make himself a machine-gun.

The parody was inspired. More than inspired, it was genius. But was it incitement to violence in the townships? Worse, was it incitement to violence in Control Data’s boardroom? To run it was to be an appalling horrible ingrate. To not run it was to be a chicken-heart hypocrite betraying the pursuit of excellence. Painful and painstaking, I pounded out a defence/apology/philosophy letter on editorial integrity, and hotfooted the first copy off the press over to Kevin Kevany at Control Data. He took it well, but I’ve always wondered how much gulping he did before his colleagues.

The ads did dry up, soon after, but that’s because CD were persuaded to quit the apartheid state for the greater good of the Eliases who’d now have that much less to spend at the Marikana Butchery. Kevin emigrated to Australia. When I look at the black marks on the *Frontline* ledger, a big one is that we may have harmed a person to whom we owed a lot.

Mind, to have said, “we’re too precious to use an excellent parody” would have been worse.

Many of the happy-multi-racial-new-nation ads were as artificial as a four cent piece, and they had a down side like Devil’s Peak. There may have been 50 of these new-world advertisers but at least 40 were never going to feature in *Frontline* where contentious editorial cluttered up the peace-and-light. While I’m lifelong grateful to the few recidivists that we did have, I also know that when you proudly presented your latest edition to the marketing managers of anyone from Lion matches to White Horse whisky they flipped through in eight

seconds. Oblivious to what pearls of nation-saving wisdom might be locked in those black-and-white columns, they'd see nothing but nice-guy ads and dismiss you as a charity case.

Which, said many well-meaning people, was what we were, so accept it. I didn't accept it. I wanted to deliver a viable market at a viable price. *Frontline* sold more than one third of the number of copies that the *Financial Mail* sold. Our rate was less than a quarter of theirs. We had – rarely if not uniquely among the “alternatives” – a real audited circulation. Logic said we qualified for an income.

Now here came Paul Hofmeyr like a man possessed, hammering the numbers as hard as he hammered the line that in a whole three years the government had not raised a squeak and Rembrandt had not missed a cover. And Paul got action; bookings and enquiries from people selling cars and clothes and insurance cover.

Meanwhile, my sister Deirdre had joined me and brought a new fierce organising oomph that hugely boosted the venture (though was also the only time that tension entered the sibling relationship). Tony was hot as ever on design, and was even being paid. It was perfect: the amiable rugby hero talking ads in boardrooms and offices and pubs, the artist with an expanding canvas, the demented wordsmith, and the hub of efficiency keeping it all in order.

The sails were set and the motor was humming. Things were gonna work out. And for six months, they did.

Paul was epileptic. In common I believe with many epileptics, especially the strapping and athletic, he resented depending on medication. Twice I had the experience of gripping his powerful jaw and holding his tongue clear of his wind-pipe. The first time, I nearly lost my fingers. The second, I smashed a wooden chair and used the leg.

In the autumn of 1983, Paul's rugby magazine was taking shape. He rented an office down the street, took on an assistant, my marathon-winning former secretary Cassandra Davis, and combined *Frontline* with *Rugby*.

Six weeks later, the phone rang early on a Monday morning. Cass's voice screamed, "Come quickly!" I sprinted to Paul's office. He was lying on the floor. I took it he was in a seizure, a different kind to what I'd seen. I yanked his collar apart, grabbed for his tongue, slapped and hit his face, but something was wrong. I became frantic. People were running in, trying to pull me off. In bewildered fury I hit and kicked.

Paul was dead. He'd had a seizure while working alone on Sunday, and drowned in phlegm.

I felt I'd lost a younger brother.

8

Poisoned Powderpuffs

IN 1983 THE TRANSVAAL PRESIDENT OF INKATHA'S YOUTH Brigade was an engaging scooter-driver named Matthews Sibanda. Matthews dropped in to *Frontline* in spare moments on his rounds and spoke soulfully of his yearning for peace and tolerance. Now and again he'd give me a handwritten article, often on a piece of cardboard or the backs of used envelopes. Some of these I rewrote with Matthews standing at my side, and I published a few. I was pleased to have them. *Frontline* was meant to be about hearing voices that didn't come from paneled studies with encyclopadiae. And Matthews, baring his soul over tea, was as sympatico a guy as you could hope to meet, though when he put pen to paper you could doubt this was the same person.

I ran a "Looking Back" series which got politicians to advance the clock by twenty years and describe what had happened. Matthews thought this a fine idea and pitched up with one of his cardboard essays. His imaginary twenty years had ended

with a one-party Inkatha state, terrifically benign, Inkatha having got there after "... having had no choice but to switch the button of violence ON".

It wasn't profound politics, but it spoke of an interesting state of mind; real people. I ran it, aware that pointy-heads would again draw unfavourable comparisons between the intellectual content of *Frontline* and the intellectual content of the London Lefty Bible the *New Statesman*, and the anti-Inkatha gang would shriek.

On the Thursday after Paul's death, Gael and Deirdre and Cassandra and I went together to his funeral. When we got back the answering machine was packed with queries: what did we have to say about *Frontline's* banning?

We knew nothing. We didn't know we'd been banned, we didn't know what we'd been banned for, we didn't even know if this was the Red Card, all-subsequent-editions (which often came with no warning), or just the watch-it, the single edition. But after four hard-sought ban-free years, with my heart and head full of Paul's funeral, I wasn't at my calm, cool, possibly mythical best. To Deirdre's distress I handed out intemperate opinions on the publications committee's morals, manners, acumen and ancestry to all who asked.

When the smoke coming out of my ears throttled back to a plume, we got around to finding out why. My *Voice*-era friends at Publications Directorate were nowhere to be found. After lots of phoning-around an obliging official in Cape Town read out the committee's report – slowly, while we wrote it down. I'm sure that all of this was irregular.

We had been banned for six words, "switch the button of violence ON".

After more ranting about the committee, which would look awfully juvenile in the cold light of print next morning, I got through to Pretoria and the new head of the Appeal Board, Kobus van Rooyen. Kobus was not used to agitated publishers screeching about a wussy little single-issue banning. For some it was at worst as painful as being slapped with a powderpuff

and for most, there was no worst at all. In fact, you could throw a Banning Party.

Here's the set-up. You had two kinds of banning, Sexy banning and Lefty banning. A Sexy banning was plain outright excellent publicity, better than you could pay for. You wake up Friday, August 4, and find the little Friday bannings list at the bottom of Page 1 of the *Rand Daily Mail*. And there you feature: "Scope", say, "Vol 37, No 6". You whoop for joy and have champagne breakfast. *Scope* is going to sell marvellously today, to people thinking that if they get in quick they'll find a special *Scope* – bigger and barer breasts than normal, or riskier writhings – before it's rounded up. Actually, the *Scope* they're buying might be Vol 38, No 2. The banned edition has been off sale since April 15.

My neighbour Dave Theron's brother was a sleaze publisher who claimed to plan his bannings. Every Xth edition he'd provoke one. I asked if his advertisers didn't get frightened off. He laughed: "Do you think I'm advertising church fetes?" He wasn't. His advertisers lost nothing from featuring in a banned edition, they lost nil repute, nil income, nil cost-effectiveness. No-one looked askance at them.

Lefty publishers were different. They had no ads. Their money, from anti-apartheid agencies abroad, was mainly allocated by Beyers Naude. A banning was a feather in the cap. You'd be on the phone in a trice, first to Beyers and then to Europe: "Look, the fascist regime is scared of us!"

I think I was the only publisher for whom a one-edition banning was bad news. If there were others, my apologies. But I can't imagine who. For *Frontline*, survival was advertisements. If an edition had, say fifteen paid pages, its nostrils were probably above water. If less, gasping took place.

And this was political banning, not light laughable sex. Eyelids got lowered. All of my advertisers were susceptible, with the paradoxical exception of Rembrandt.

At minimum, my banning order for Matthews Sibanda's six words was goodbye to the commercial advertisers that Paul had

brought in, and the agencies he had been working on. No-one would give a client a schedule with an unpatriotic name on it. At worst, heightened jeopardy faced the few bold execs who supported *Frontline* – Anton Roodt at Federale Volksbeleggings, Deon Erasmus at Breweries, John Gaunt at Standard Bank, others who would not welcome a mention.

I was a long time on the phone with Kobus, reading him the article and the committee’s report as dictated to us. He didn’t say (as I said to the newspapers), “this ban is stunningly stupid”, but his line of thought flowed that way. The Act allowed him to suspend a ban pending an appeal. This section had never been used, by him or any predecessor. Today was its day. This was at six in the evening. Technically, the ban came into operation at midnight. Here is a nice piece of trivial history. What was the only South African publication ever to be unbanned six hours before it was banned? *Frontline* Vol 3 No 8, of June 1983.

This was a victory of sorts and I could have hugged Kobus, but as an air-sanitiser it flopped, or boomeranged. Half the weekend newspapers had “Frontline Banned” and the other half had “Frontline Ban Suspended”. One paper had both, on different pages. We were twice as public as we might have been, and mystifying.

On Monday, Kobus produced written reasons, meaning another burst of reports. Then the Appeal Board’s Mrs Van der Walt did a bit of obliging queue-jumping to sneak in the appeal on Tuesday morning, so that was Round 4 of publicity surges. Judgment was delivered late on Tuesday afternoon, in our favour, by which time anybody reading or hearing the news would notice a small item about a *Frontline* ban being made or suspended or unmade, and all anyone knew was that “Frontline” and “ban” went together like Dagwood and Blondie.

Three and a half years of paranoid propriety was blown asunder by six words; Inkatha words. We’d run every kind of dissension you can mention – believing that dissent is a thing better raised than hidden – and we were banned for a story

from Inkatha. The cosmos had a sense of humour. Inkatha were supposed to be the white man's favourite blacks. Various of the white man's unfavourite blacks couldn't believe it. I kept hearing that the ban was part of a conspiracy to "give credibility" to *Frontline* or Inkatha or both.

Matthews later hit trouble related to the button of violence, and I thought again of atrocities being not committed by abnormal people so much as by normal people in abnormal circumstances. Here was a guy of whom Deirdre once said, "People like that give you faith in humanity", this after he sat in our office with his helmet in his lap talking of his urgency for beauty in the world. The same could be said of activists in ANC, PAC, Azapo, the lot, and even Righties. The Righties often spoiled it, of course, with vicious anti-blackness, but the viciousness, too, was fear talking. South Africa was one large abnormal circumstance.

But was "normalising" the answer? The anti-apartheid industry talked of "normality" all the time, with a tang of strawberries and cream, as if "normal" was self-evidently "better". I didn't think normal was wonderful. If you wanted the smiling earnest faces of the justice-seekers to smile earnestly under pressure, too, you wanted better than normal; more insurance that my meat would not be your poison.

A month after the Sibanda banning the dust was settling, leaving three cancelled contracts and unknowable never-made contracts. Then we were banned again.

I, like everyone, had addressed Pretoria's Church Street bombing, the most dramatic act of revolution South Africa had seen. I had naturally denounced, decried and deprecated car-bombers with a heavy-duty trowel. That was scarcely news. I had also gone a step further on the blindfold search for the centre of my mind, and here was the first time I articulated the proposition that we had to have complete black liberation, not partial, and the whites had to see it as definitely better, not maybe better.

Except I don't know that "articulated" is the right word. I look back at that article and it is pompous and boring. Then again, everything I ever wrote looks pompous and boring later. Perhaps, if it didn't, the mind would have jammed. Some people read it anyway, and I had a dose of new hah-hah-ism. "Gee, Denis, we look forward to hearing how to arrange this total liberation that the right-wingers will also like. Hah hah." But some were less amused and among the unamused was the Publications Committee.

The phrase that stuck in their gullet was: "When one man is fighting to acquire citizenship in his country and another is fighting to prohibit him from acquiring it, then the first man's cause is fundamentally just and the second man's is not."

Here was a re-run of Jimmy Kruger and *World* seven years earlier. Once again I was saying there'd be no peace until liberation; once again I was saying there'd be no liberation until the whites saw the other side. Once again I was getting the chop.

My thinking had moved seven years on, and I could have sworn these had been seven fertile years. But the thumpable sentence was a paraphrase of the *Weekend World* sentence that Kruger had thumped seven years ago in Bloemfontein.

As with the Sibanda case I presented the appeal in person; this time I lost. This time there was no Inkatha complication. It was me personally being the bad guy. Skim-readers of the court reports gathered that I had defended bombers. Barely a month after "Frontline" and "Ban" had become inextricable, "Bombers" created an unholy triangle around my desperately well-intentioned little magazine.

Thanks to Prime Minister PW Botha, Bans and Bombs didn't last long as *Frontline's* stamp of identity. They were displaced by an image that wise and discerning persons, who listened closely, voiced in words like "lateral" and "inventive". The more widespread public judgment involved terms such as "hare-brained". Whichever; I was happier to be hare-brained than to be presumed to defend killing and maiming (which, perversely,

it was more upsetting to be congratulated for than attacked for).

PW Botha called a referendum, to ask enfranchised white citizens of the Republic if we supported a plan for government to de-whiten itself in its inimitably race-bound fashion. We were invited to give one of two answers. One answer was “Yes”. The other answer was “No”. Those two sentences are not quite as bland as they look...

“Yes” meant that Indians would be represented by Indians in an Indian House, coloureds represented by coloureds in a coloured house; Africans as unrepresented as ever. It was ludicrous, tragic. It would create civil wars among Indians and coloureds. It would make the polls frightening and dangerous. It would rub African faces in Outness. It would ruin or kill participants. You couldn’t vote “Yes”.

But you couldn’t vote “No”, either.

There were two Noes. The Conservative No said “no dilution of white rule, or the end is the blacks taking over”. The Liberal No was supposed to say, “Not enough, go back to the drawing board and do better”.

The liberal establishment, headed by the Official Opposition, the Progressive Federal Party, was in sleep-walk. They thought the “No” was their “No”. They were the Official opposition, they insisted. It was them that the government was fighting off.

Well, this was wishful. The government barely noticed its Official alternative, occupying a fifth of the House. It was terrified of its own defectors, occupying cockpits, occupying tanks, occupying half the minds of possibly a majority of government supporters, and saying, “Our country is being given to the blacks”.

To the person in the street, it was abundantly evident that what mattered was the Right. But the liberal leadership was in a cocoon, insisting on their Officialness. (In the end, coarsely summarised, English votes went “Yes” en masse, giving the Verligte or Enlightened half of Afrikaners a landslide over the Verkrampptes or Benighted ones.)

These shortest of words, Yes and No, spawned a million

long words as every editor and commentator ground out one or other answer. To one editor and commentator, since a “Yes” was out of the question and a “No” was unthinkable, it was best to duck.

In the September edition, I ducked.

And I got a howl of protest.

This was genuinely instructive. I’d been sounding opinions all along, occasionally hearing that someone had read them but never suspecting that anyone would miss them. But yep, people were missing this opinion. Wow! I felt obliged. I wrestled. Others wrestled. Pieter le Roux, prof of economics at the University of the Western Cape; Rykie van Reenen, recently retired as *Rapport*’s super-enlightened genius columnist; Hazel Moolman, deputy director of the Institute of Race Relations. We discussed.

Others, too. Everyone said the question was a “Have you stopped beating your wife?” You were damned by a Yes and damned by a No. Of course, if someone actually asked you that question you wouldn’t say either Yes or No. You’d say, “I have never beaten my wife.” (Or klap the questioner.)

What a pity the referendum did not let us choose our own way of answering. Hmm. Didn’t it? It told you to put your X against the Yes or your X against the No, But it didn’t stop you putting a big X across both. This act would be counted and recorded, as a “spoilt vote”.

Normally the spoilt vote was a meaningless half-percent thing comprised of people who changed their minds in mid-stream or wrote abuse. But if a meaning was allocated to that space, anything more than a percent or so would constitute an expression. In some countries the “spoilt vote” was known to take on meanings that the legislature did not intend. In Australia it was called “voting informal”, and had won a referendum – on forestry in Tasmania.

The October *Frontline* displayed a two-page article called “Sense and Conscience in the Third Option”, claiming Route 3 for the cause of “it’s a try but not good enough”. That was a large claim and a twopenny magazine was not the ideal source

to stake it, but nobody was claiming the same patch for any other cause, so the flag we erected was uncontested.

I thought we'd done our duty, dropped a little pebble into the pot and that was it. It wasn't. The little pebble rippled, and for a month I was a politician, pounding the keyboard with polemics on the "Third Option" and exercising my jaw behind microphones. For a while it seemed the issue was going to fly. Everywhere I went, from ambassadorial dinners to the barber to the bottle store, people were saying, "Yeah, right on." What we lacked, though, was decent authority. The Nats were plugging Yes, the Progs were plugging No. Pieter Who, Hazel Who and Denis Who were plugging some complicated thing.

Van Zyl Slabbert, Leader of the Opposition, was unimpressed to freezing point. He sent me a furious letter suggesting we get off his pitch in a hurry. Other Progs told us fulsomely, off the record, that they wished they'd gone our way to start with. Now, smelling their flop coming up, they went ape when niggly nobodies stood up in their meetings and asked why they didn't go for the spoilt vote. They shot it down with vehemence. One Sunday night the temporary unofficial "Spoilt Vote Party" met a top Prog who wept in frustration that he was tied to the No. On Tuesday morning we read him in the *Rand Daily Mail* denouncing us as irresponsible, ignorant and imbecilic, with dark hints about ulterior motives.

A few days later we had the great, if backhand, privilege of watching the Prime Minister savaging the "very silly people" who wanted to "make the South African voter look as if he does not know how to cast a vote".

Ja, well. A Yes would give us black rejection and embattled Indian and coloured elections; a No a rampant Right, with the blinkered liberals having helped them in. It was heads the country loses and tails it also loses. PW Botha didn't need us to make the SA voter look stupid.

But we needed someone to give clout, someone patently non-stupid, someone to say "it makes sense to vote informal" loud enough for people to believe that other people would

believe, and become a movement.

One by one the Big Names came out, almost all for the Yes. Eventually a single major figure remained conspicuously undeclared and this was the most major of all, the colossus, Harry Oppenheimer. If Harry endorsed Option 3, it'd be on the map overnight.

Gael and I were invited to dinner at his home, Brenthurst, along with three of Harry's confidantes – Boz Bozzoli, the vice-chancellor of Wits; Jan Steyn, head of the Urban Foundation; Peter Gush, chairman of Anglo's gold division. The spoilt vote was the central topic and I advocated as I had never advocated before. By the end, both Gush and Steyn were pushing heavily, "You must do it, Harry, you must do it." Bozzoli was as frosted as Slabbert had been, taking the view that if the government said "Yes" to anything whatever the obvious task of good men and true was to say "No". Harry nibbled tantalisingly, but when he walked us to our car he said, "You do realise that I have a long history of involvement with the Progressive Party" and we figured that was that.

A couple of days later there were newspaper posters with various mergings of "Harry O" and "NO". Harry had endorsed the Progs. Then *The Star*, the biggest daily and the last to pronounce, invented the Fourth Option.

Harvey Tyson, the editor, set out a front page leader with reasoning so similar to mine that I heard the same joke fifty times: it should have had an asterisk citing *Frontline*. But at the end Harvey strikes out bold and original. What he says is: abstain. Since you can't vote Yes and you can't vote No, stay home and don't vote.

I suppose, perhaps, maybe, in charitable moments, I can nearly begin to understand Harvey's problem. The spoilt vote was a confusing thing, not least due to the sheer semantics. The claim that you could make it meaningful was derided as "an intellectual option". It would have ceased to be "intellectual" if enough clout was applied, but en route you'd need to brave out "intellectual".

Nobody accused Harvey of taking “an intellectual option.” I heard him on the radio, being asked why not the spoilt vote. His answer seemed to be that abstention was sounder because there’d be more abstainers than spoilt-voters. And with the accuracy of that insight, who could argue?

In the end the spoilt votes were no more than the normal illiterate-and-confused quota, except in the two liberal strongholds, the southern suburbs of Cape Town and northern suburbs of Johannesburg, where it was six times as high, which at 3% was not dramatic. The Third Option came third, as jokers told me for months.

Other people told me other things, such as of polling stations in those same areas where the electoral officer had agreed with the party representatives to divvy out spoilt votes – one for thee and one for me, no-one present to stand up for the spoilers. I took affidavits. I still have them. I was much urged to go to court. Bah. What would be achieved?

One day, some day, people will again face a possibility of creating an option that their leaders did not want to give them. And someone will argue earlier, better, that it can be done. Maybe the account I’ve just given you will encourage that someone. Good. Maybe I myself will be fanatically on the side of the Yes or the No, and abhor the third prospect. It’ll still be good to have it; fairer, richer, an advance.

As it was, our spoilt vote frolic achieved one historic outcome. The Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition reached the only agreement they ever reached: that the spoilt-vote gang were bad, bad, news.

9

Missing Link

IN THE MIDDLE OF 1984 I BEGAN TO SYSTEMATICALLY murder *Frontline*. So Pieter le Roux said, and many agreed. I took offence until reality mugged me. I had a bee in my bonnet, was the trouble. Bees in bonnets are bad news for small and already offbeat magazines, but while the bee is buzzing you can't see that.

In my March editorial I had re-nailed my colours to the mast of universal franchise. This wasn't new – since schooldays I had objected to categories of South Africanness and later, in banned *World* and a banned edition of *Frontline*, for instance, I had maintained that no sense could be made of the place as long as we were fighting about who was what level of citizen.

But the March editorial used the trigger words “one man one vote” rather than the softer synonyms like “equal citizenship” and the trigger detonated a few mental grenades. Looking back, that editorial is as fizzy as mud, dripping with anxious even-handedness, but in the ideological lunatic-asylum of 1984 those

four short words spelt “communist/rapist/eats-white-babies”.

I wondered about the world and life and everything when I read in the *Natal Mercury* that I was a “vitriolic ultra-leftist”. There was a bout of the familiar tokens of protest, cancelled subs. And Newman Robinson in Estcourt, a former assistant editor of *The Star*, wrote to say I should can it. “One man one vote” frightened literate people of every complexion. I should rather plug the qualified franchise.

Newman was the world’s nicest guy, but the qualified franchise was the world’s lousiest politics. I started writing a single sentence to tack on in italics below his letter.

I wanted to say, No, one man one vote is good for you, too. This was a little difficult to establish.

The pile of discarded drafts ascended. The calendar kept turning. I finally had to let the April edition go, holding Newman out of it. Next thing, I was delaying May. I had a word-count to beat the Old Testament and was pounding out more. Then a similar letter arrived from Somerset West, with an opening to the effect of “I wouldn’t dream of calling you insane, but...”

The new guy re-split my focus, so off went May with a reply saying “Reply coming”, and after another fervid month the supposed one-sentence reply was a nine-page epic which, if it had nothing else, at least had an end.

It featured in June, my case that the heat and hysteria about “one man one vote” was a mistake. It was only heated because the whites assumed that the end result would be a hollow non-democracy. That could be counteracted by establishing a deeper democracy than ever, which wasn’t hard to do. We just needed a fuller pyramid of powers, so that all political leaders constantly had to renew their mandate from constituents who, however rich, poor, learned, ignorant or whatever, had one central feature in common: they’d rather compromise than vote themselves into war. Universal franchise was going to be a most undramatic thing. Made an effective franchise, the outcome would be a pile of stability.

I sweated blood on those nine pages. It took a month to churn

out 80,000 words and two more to delete 70,000 of them. That was mistake Number One. Heavyweight arguments must come in heavyweight packaging. People say they want brevity and accessibility, but when they get brevity and accessibility they call it frivolity.

I thought the franchise argument would spark debate. Months previously I had sparked debate with a shorter and easier article – the spoilt papers – and I assumed there was some correlation between effort of input and effect of output. Mistake Number Two.

There was a trickle of replies. Vause Raw, the leader of the New Republic Party, sent one. Willie Breytenbach of the Department of Constitutional Planning sent another. I ran about ten in the end, and would have run more but they all said the same thing: Nice to be idealistic, what about the real world?

Well, what about it? The “real world” was in a straitjacket, moving in to the turmoil of ‘85. I acquired the habit of relating the conflicts we were seeing to the thought of how the accountable society I had in mind would handle them. The answer was always: with less difficulty. Chain the politicians to the people who elected them, and you’d get a dull and stable society.

Impotence was the thing: impotence, present, perceived, or prospective. Why were people throwing stones? To protest their impotence under white rule. Why were the babas of the townships terrified of stonethrowers? Because they were impotent. Why were the liberals emigrating? They were already impotent and they saw black rule making them more impotent. Why were the police hammering protesters? Because black rule would plunge them into impotence.

What I was getting at was: let the majority really rule and you’re going to have all kinds of people making most of their own decisions over the things that bother them most. Majority rule didn’t need to mean “black rule” and it didn’t need to mean a mess. I was sure that once the nation had a moment to wrap its mind around an unfamiliar proposition, it would

rise as one to embrace it. Black and white alike would see the antidote to the “route of Africa” with its decline and poverty, and peace would flow.

Unfortunately, the grand plan eluded the general public, so I thought, well, I’d better say it again.

During 1985 *Frontline* became what I had sworn it would never be: a tract. I sneaked in propaganda for ultra-democracy at every turn. I believed I saw an answer and I was bound to inflict it upon my audience, who cancelled their subscriptions.

Then it struck me that I needed a champion, and I nagged the prominent and the powerful until I was persona non grata everywhere.

Among the Nats, Stoffel van der Merwe, Leon Wessels and Wynand Malan paid polite attention. Wynand, already an uncomfortable Nat, became several notches more uncomfortable on the day we had a very long lunch at the White Horse Inn in Randburg. The State of Emergency had just been declared and Wynand was Randburg’s MP. The European immigrant hotelier was overjoyed to have such a dignitary grace his dining room. We sat next to a window in the west sun and talked for hours, interrupted every ten minutes by the proprietor bragging about his special guest from our strong no-nonsense government that keeps the blacks down. Next day the right side of my face was scarlet.

Wynand said that he bought half my argument – you need to start with full-scale universal franchise, rather than to move to it in stages. He balked at the other half. I was saying that majority rule needn’t mean the wiping-out of the whites. He seemed to me to be saying: yes, that’s what it ought to mean.

This was my first taste of a phenomenon that became big after the Boere-Somersault of 1990. I was in an old-style liberal and Wynand was a member of an authoritarian white government. I had always opposed his lot from the Left; that was clear as day. Now he was whacking me for recognising his party’s “group” concerns.

Half a decade later all the Nats caught up with him – which

brought them, I felt, to where we liberals had been a decade earlier.

With Stoffel van der Merwe I had breakfast at the Johannesburg Country Club. Stoffel was PW Botha's right-hand, Minister of umpty things and Acting Minister of more. I had rehearsed my case like never before. It was a fine Saturday morning. We were on the stoep. The head waiter hovered forth with an arm held horizontal, several ties draped over it. He advised in silky headwaiterly tones that Dress Code required ties on the stoep.

I was ready to do injury but Stoffel chuckled and picked a tie. At least he had a collar. I was in a T-shirt, and spent four hours with improbable tie fastened to barren neck, feeling like a cartoon character.

Stoffel was in early stages of thinking around an adjustment of the "group" approach, letting people select their groups instead of being undilutedly colour-coded.

I couldn't see much future in giving a guy the right to go and sign a form in front of a magistrate saying he now wished to transfer from the Xhosa group to the Indian group, or whatever. I wanted it to be natural for anybody to go to any polling booth and vote for anybody who he thought would do him some good, just as I could vote for an Afrikaner or an English-speaker regardless. Stoffel said that was out of the question, it meant the elimination of the whites – look at Zimbabwe. I said Zimbabwe was hardly an example; the whites had dealt themselves out. Zimbabwe showed not the route to follow but the route not to follow – a simplistic introduction of a simplistic franchise where the whole election is about a handful of personalities. We needed the opposite: to make the political structure so comprehensive that practicalities came to the fore and symbols faded to the background. Stoffel wasn't buying it.

Nor was anyone else. I spent six weeks putting the argument into a nutshell for Chris Heunis, the Minister of Constitutional Development. I did it in officialese – point form with numbered paragraphs. I got a short and courteous note of thanks. I

suppose Heunis would mark such efforts with a “CL” or some such as he dropped them in his out-tray, code to his secretary for “Standard letter to Proposers of Crank Constitutions”. I couldn’t blame him. Crank constitutions were high fashion and I, too, was drowning in them as private patriots throughout the land sought an outlet for nutty ideas and *Frontline* acquired a reputation as being the place to float nutty ideas. After all, look at the nutty one it was already punting.

There were a million variations on the qualified franchise theme. There was a massive glossy tome with a plan to give the blacks 40% of the power now and an additional 1% every ten years. There was a proposal to make Buthelezi joint President, which would mean that then the whites would have the Zulus on their side and between them they’d knock the stuffing out of the rest. There were several schemes to hold the outside world to ransom. One set out a price-list for reforms – for X billion rands abolish the Population Registration Act; for Y billion give the blacks a Fourth Chamber ... There were religious schemes, anarchist schemes, despotic schemes, no end. There was one to start off by giving blacks 60 years old or over the vote and if they used it responsibly extend it steadily downward. The prize-winner was a guy who said the problem was black education. Abolish black education entirely and then there’d be no blacks with aspirations to rule.

In this context I couldn’t take it amiss that Heunis slapped his CL for Crank Letter on my effort. At least he replied, which was more than most.

Oliver Tambo, President of the ANC, also replied, in what was, touchingly, not a form letter. My case to him was that he was getting nowhere waiting for the government to hand over power to an ANC which could choose whether to exercise that power with restraint. He needed to construct a liberation so thorough that no-one would ever run away with power.

I took it that the choice was between a democratic ANC government relatively soon and a Stalinist ANC some time later. I wanted Tambo to succeed in acquiring one common

nation, and free us of the attrition. He failed to agree with my prescription, but terrifically nicely.

As I saw it, entrenching democracy was an avenue lying in wait for someone to pick up. Who? Whoever may be interested. I tried Mangosuthu Buthelezi. I had been in Pietermaritzburg talking to a lunch club of the local gentry. (One of few times I brought a house down. A publisher named Libbie van Heerden raised copious complications about white writers writing for black readers & vice versa, ending with “Mr Beckett, can you offer advice.” I had ear-to-ear vacuum but reflexively got out “use short sentences”.)

Buthelezi’s driver was supposed to pick me up at 3 pm but arrived after midnight just after I had sunk between the Imperial Hotel’s sheets. He was rarin’ for the 250 kilometres back to Ulundi and I had a hard time vetoing that and a harder time vetoing his subsequent intention to sleep in the car. He and two unexpected additional passengers ended up in my room, over the protests of the Zulu night clerk to whom black men in white men’s quarters was an offence to Our Lord Jesus.

It had evidently been a long and showerless day. The three huddled on the carpet under one of my blankets and we embarked on a duel over ventilation. I’d fall asleep, wake after half an hour with a choking sensation, find the window had been closed, open it and fall asleep for another half-hour, on and on through the night. We left at six with the driver putting in practice for the world land speed record.

Buthelezi was all warmth and brotherhood. I tried in vain to proselytise him into the accountability cause, and then put on my journalist’s hat and interviewed him. I thought it was a fair interview. Anti-Inkatha people thought it was a pro-Inkatha interview – but then, they think any reference to Buthelezi is pro unless it carries several derogatory adjectives per each syllable of his name. Buthelezi did not think it was fair. So I was “reliably informed”, although the customary long angry letter remained absent. At the time I thought this meant he was mellowing. Later I would look back on it as an ominous silence.

I tried Enos Mabuza, one of the great unrecognised of our nation. Enos was wrongly relegated to second-rung status, partly because of his gentle demeanour and partly because the homeland he headed – Kangwane – is small and untroubled and low in headlines. He wasn't the biggest catch imaginable, but he was a fabulous listener. One day in Johannesburg I ferried him from Wilgespruit in the deep, deep, west, to the airport in the deep, deep, east, snowing his ear all the way. At the airport he said "I'd like to hear more of this". What?! Nobody said that! I decided he was the most gentlemanly gentleman in the hemisphere.

He was due to open his parliament a few days later. He said I should come along and when the pomp and ceremony was over we'd take the Great Theory further.

The Commissioner General, Punt Jansen, was guest of honour and made a sweet speech about good neighbours and good fences, the standard soft-apartheid line. Enos stood up to reply and I watched in awe. It was a masterly performance in three languages. Enos came from an illiterate background and only began picking up readin' and ritin' at an age where your private-school kid was ditching Biggles for James Bond. He still has unusual mispronunciations which show that he garnered his English via written word more than spoken, and have the odd effect of heightening his command of the language. Like Bernard Shaw's hairy hound from Budapest, his English is too good to be an Englishman's, and it's still pale in relation to his Afrikaans. You seldom hear excellent Afrikaans any longer, it's all slang and Anglicism, until up comes an Enos who learned it by the book.

Enos first made Punt feel good about the world, detailing with lavish imagery what a superstar Commissioner he was, and then proceeded to establish in terms as blunt as they were polite that the government was immoral, illegitimate, and wrong from A to Z.

At tea afterwards the seconded white officials were oohing and aahing and singing Enos' praises, in contrast to the usual

mumbled resentment about black ingratitude. I came across Punt sitting alone on a step in his hang-loose fashion and asked what he thought. Punt said, “God was in the best of moods when He made that man”. I thought God hadn’t been feeling too bad when He made Punt either. I’d been a junior reporter when he was Deputy Minister of Education and he’d been the most accessible guy in the phone book, answering every question without hesitation and usually throwing in a few extras as well. Nowadays you go through a secretary’s secretary and three weeks later you get a prepared statement saying nothing in careful disguise.

It seemed odd to find a politician whom everyone liked, and since it was only tomorrow that I was re-propagandising Enos I resumed the journalist’s role and sleuthed. I went to the bars of Nelspruit and the shebeens of Kanyamazane and picked up hitch-hikers and called at the Conservative Party and at Azapo and asked how Kangwane was coming on and how Mr Mabuza was shaping up. The CP man said he’d have no problem being ruled by Mabuza; but the Mabusas would be pushed out by the communists. The Azapo office said they had no problem with Mabuza; but couldn’t collaborate with apartheid. Around the townships, yep, a problem there was. Kangwane is meant to be the Swazi homeland, but lots of people thought Mabuza was Shangaan. To some, this mattered. To some it didn’t. To some, he wasn’t Shangaan anyway.

For neither the first time nor the last I wondered how much of the ethnic hang-up the homeland policy had created and how much was there to start with. But once I had worried that the ethnic mix held heavy downsides. Now I worried no more. I was attuned to viewing every conflict not as it was but as it might be. As it was, politics consisted of activists carooming about like the atoms of a sulphur reaction, claiming unprovable support, press-ganging the doubtful and operating on a skewed foundation. As it could be, politics would consist of practical relationships between elected leaders, persuading and inveigling semi-interested voters to the polls, settling their disputes by

order-papers and compromise, and complaining about the apathy of the masses. What would it matter whether Mabuza was a Swazi or a Zoroastrian? Those who wanted would vote for him; those who did not would not; and the whole bunch would be chained to the effects of a sound political foundation.

After rattling about in Mabuza's cupboard and finding no skeletons I prepared a batch of questions. A plot was forming. I was sick of finding feet of clay beneath the "positive" stories which kept coming up in the newspapers. *Drum* magazine, for instance, ran a feature called "Masterpiece in Bronze", to demonstrate black success. Once the chosen success was a youthful entrepreneur who wore white suits and white shoes and drove a white Rolls Royce. The story was lyrical about the reach of his business empire but was coy about the nature of the empire, which was mandrax and extortion. My plot was to do a real success story, whole and unmistakable: Mabuza.

Unfortunately, the sleuthing involved more momentum than planning, and what with ambling along back roads and overnighing at a farm and dawdling at villages I lost track of the Karos hotel at Kanyamazane where I was to meet Mabuza at 12.30.

Mid morning I found myself driving faster than sanity or speedcops permit and then my car sprang a nervous tic in its timing, giving an almighty backfire every few minutes. I hurtled through the wondrous hills of the eastern Transvaal like a constipated kangaroo on steroids, wreaking damage to my spinal cord but mindful of the social error of keeping the Chief Minister twiddling thumbs in the heart of his own bailiwick. Mabuza was still there when I hopped up the Karos drive an hour late, and greeted me with every iota of his ineffable courtesy. He gets my vote, anywhere, anytime.

I never finished the Mabuza article. It got on top of me. This was a frequent fate of the stuff I was keenest on. I'd get three quarters through and think it had to be better, it had to be fuller. Practicalities would intervene and particularly the practicality called "paying the printer". Drafts of the articles I liked too

much to let go were sinking down the pile on my desk while I perused trade magazines in advertising agency lobbies, waiting for a teenybopper media planner to see me half an hour late and hear me with half an ear, between painting her fingernails and taking her calls. Once per blue moon a booking resulted; most times I got the shrug-off.

Frontline was little known, it was odd, it lacked a neat segmented readership. It was Political, a word falling between Offensive and Queer in the media placement lexicon, and worse still it was presumed to be “pro-black”. “*Frontline!*?” said one media luminary, “We can’t advertise in *Frontline!* We have government contracts!”

At least he laid it on the line; most people saw me off politely and disinfected the office afterwards. I religiously sent fact-sheets to advertisers. Once in a while one would be anonymously returned with a kaffirboetie-type comment scrawled on it – and once in a while a recipient rang to offer encouragement – but most simply hit File 13 along with the rest of the junk mail. Meanwhile Father Time was treading his course. The people I’d been writing about would inconsiderately go on with their lives, changing the context or outdating the content of my yellowing drafts. I now have enough drawers and boxes of unpublished three-quarter articles to float a paper recycling plant, the unfinished unravelling of the real world of Kangwane and Enos Mabuza among them.

Nor did Mabuza ever finally bite on the hook I dangled before him, at least, not to the point of standing up and proclaiming to the world, “Hey, here’s the missing link”. He was all ears during our late lunch, and later, but he thinks I’m getting at a complicated social engineering and it doesn’t gel.

It didn’t gel in Walker Street either. Walker Street in Pretoria is the government’s brains trust, headquarters of the Department of Constitutional Development (whose large ugly building is built on the site of the house where my mother was brought up).

After much nagging I got to state my case to the planning

boffins. Duly fitted out in best shirt and neatest tie, I shot my cuffs, strode in and started off.

Thirty seconds later they were rolling in the aisles. “One man one vote! We can’t put that to the cabinet!” By the end, they were chewing over the proposition that if you want to trip up the wildmen you do it by making the electoral process so full that they are cut down to the size of their support. Fanie Cloete, who later got the chop for fraternising with the antis, said, “There might be something in that – but for every group in its own group structure of course”. His boss, Joe van Tonder, did not smile even upon that prospect, a prospect which to me was a total missing of the point. Politics would be skewed as long as it was about citizenship. You’d have whites voting on dud grounds – what to do about the blacks rather than what to do about economics or social relations – and worse, you’d have blacks not voting at all.

That was the bottom line. Anybody can say he is speaking “for the masses” or “for the Zulus” or whoever, and he can’t prove that he is and nobody can prove that he isn’t. Homeland election statistics are hard to procure and impossible to interpret. Antis can and do say that voters are reluctant voters, scared of the penalties of officialdom. Participants can and do say that non-voters are reluctant non-voters, terrified of the stones of bully-boys. Everyone believes the version they like.

It’s myth and mirage. Ludicrous choose-your-leader polls bring forth athletes and pop stars and are analysed in sombre academic papers. Crowd counts are dissected with heat. Did 10,000 or 25,000 protesters march in Johannesburg in September 1989? The crowd-count battle was fought in disregard of the five million people in easy access of the city who did not join the march. Did one million or three million black churchgoers applaud PW Botha at Moria in 1987? For years angry liberationists said it was a white media plot to claim there were three million sell-outs. Impossible! There couldn’t be more than one million! Did 60,000 or 100,000 greet Nelson Mandela in Soweto after his release? Everyone said this was the

biggest political rally Soweto ever saw. Nobody said that the stadium was less crushed than at Saturday soccer.

In the '81 election I covered two meetings at the Vereeniging town hall. For moderate Pik Botha the hall was half full and for extremist Jaap Marais it overflowed. If this had been a black meeting there would have been learned pronouncements about groundswell support for Jaap's ultra-right HNP. But it wasn't. Vereeniging went to the polls and the HNP lost its deposit as usual.

You want stability; get the polling booth to rule. That was not a proposition to cause heart attacks among the Constitutional Planners. But what booth to go to? The planners contemplated homeland polls, partitioned polls, meritocratic polls ... anything except one-person-one-vote polls. They believed that when they found the "right" reform the blacks would roll up to ratify some power-sharing structure. The middle classes would lead the way, having moderated their politics because they had "more to lose". This was Alice-in-Wonderland logic to me; an illiterate 70-year-old could vote in these half-citizenship schemes, but for a preacher or teacher voting was a social disgrace not far from pederasty. No-one rejects second-class citizenship more than the guy with first-class comforts.

At dinner at the flat of Anna Starcke, the doyen of socio-pol forecasters, I watched Chris Heunis plugging the line to Fanyana Mazibuko and four other Soweto gurus:

"Gentlemen, we have opened negotiating channels, please come and negotiate".

"Mr Minister, we do not recognise your negotiating channels."

"Gentlemen, please come to my negotiating channels and negotiate that".

"Mr Minister, to negotiate in your negotiating channels would mean recognising your negotiating channels".

"Gentlemen, we have opened channels to our negotiating channels ..."

That was Part I of why you needed universal franchise in

one step: black boycotts. Part II was the wedge. Every half-way reform would leave more whites in dread of the half still to come. The need was to re-paint the end picture.

On neither count was the sales case ideal. To people at one end of the spectrum, only Satan could want equal citizenship. At the other end, equal citizenship wasn't dull rules of order with space for arguers and obstructors. It was neat total takeover as befitted a continent in shambles.

In the middle I fared no better, partly due to race heresy. The calling-cry of the politically respectable – who are 3% of the people and 97% of the media – is that racism is the problem. To me, fear was the problem. There was a difference. The difference became a problem.

I told you about Langa Skosana and the Mineworkers Union, where I got the dogbox for saying it was alright to chuck him out. I'd say to the outraged, "How would you like Langa to have the same rights and powers as you and me?"

They'd say, "Ja, fine, of course, he's obviously an educated chap".

I'd say, "And how about his brothers and cousins and neighbours and maid?"

They'd say, "Hold it, that's extreme".

I wanted Langa and his aunties and all to have the power of citizenship and I also wanted them to be damn firmly chained to the processes of citizenship. I couldn't get excited about whose tea-parties they would attend. I've been thrown out of black functions for being the wrong colour – sometimes BC-type political occasions and sometimes shebeens where people want to let their hair down without minding Ps and Qs in English to the standards of some gawping whitey. If giving people confidence that democracy was not just a swamping helped them past the vicious side of race fear, bring it on.

That's what I thought. But when I tried to talk the luminaries of liberalism into championing ultra-democracy I met shock and horror, often so hypocritical that you could puke. (Like the great joy at having 2% black kids at your child's school – "Look!

No apartheid!” – combined with great relief that the school is too expensive to have more.)

I got to know a lot about cold shoulders, but one particular shoulder was far from cold, though never getting either tangibly or publicly involved. The first time I met Harry Oppenheimer was at Otto Krause’s flat, with Ton Vosloo, then editor of *Beeld*. When the Oppenheimers left, Ton said, “Now that the constitutional monarch has gone we can take off our jackets”.

Harry had maintained interest, and his subscription, after the time he didn’t bite at the Spoilt Vote in ‘83. From time to time the royal command followed and I’d explain myself in his dramatically muralled dining room at 44 Main Street, seat of De Beers and Anglo-American.

Harry’s bulls-eye rate was wonderful. At every stretch of logic, every unsubstantiated assumption, I’d be nailed – courteously nailed, but unmistakably. He was the first to show me one big problem. He understood me as trying to divide South Africa into thousands of bits, which was precisely not the plan; indeed the reverse.

I’d thought Harry was on top of what I was arguing. On the big stuff, like the unplumbed anchor effect of the humble person’s vote, he was uncannily in tune. He could hear half a sentence and register things that I could have to argue half a night elsewhere. I was stunned to lose him for dreary old devolution. To me, chaining politicians to the people was a higher, nobler, better founded, business altogether. The multiplication of powers strengthened the chains, and made the federal-vs-unitary wrangling obsolete.

But if Harry wasn’t getting it, who the hell was? Not a lot of people, I was to learn. I went back to the drawing-board, with the marginal solace of having been tutored from the top.

10

The Seven-Year Switch

EARLY IN 1987 I MET LOUIS NEL, MINISTER OF INFORMATION, by chance in a lift. I introduced myself and was surprised that he was warm and amiable. I was as yet half graduated from expecting top Nats to have iron teeth and pointy tails and give someone like me only scowls and remonstrance.

I told Nel he was the unanimous choice of the nation's sub-editors for State President. He looked quizzical. I said that with 2½ letters in his surname he'd make the headline writers' life a doddle. God forbid a Van der Westhuizen got the job.

Nel doubted the sub-editors' support would do much for his career (he was right, he was sacked soon after) and asked how *Frontline* was going. I said there was a tightness in the budgetary arena, which was an understatement for the fact that I had stomach cramps every time I saw an invoice. Nel asked how long I'd been at it and I said seven years. "Well there you are", he said, "the next seven years will be the good ones".

This seemed consoling but as I drove back to the office I got

to mulling whether good years could properly be good years if you had to know that after seven of them you came short again. I needn't have bothered because Nel was wrong and he started being proved wrong then and there. A deputy sheriff was waiting with a defamation summons from the Chief Minister of Kwazulu, Mangosuthu Buthelezi.

I heard the sounds of diverging opinions from down the passage. One opinion was that of Nomavenda Mathiane, my one-time secretary from *World*, who was now the other half of *Frontline*. The other was an Afrikaans male voice. Both were raised.

The deputy sheriff had to serve his summons on me personally, so Nomavenda had invited him to wait. He was a branch leader of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging, believing that the blacks should have no political rights at all. She was an Africanist, believing that the whites should have no political rights at all. By the time I got there they had been through shock and mutual revulsion and were on their third cup of tea and deep into the fiercest argument either would ever enjoy.

He stayed for another hour, enlightening us, between AWB propaganda, to numerous off-the-record glimpses of the perspectives his job provided and the astronomical income it secured – making NomaV and me wonder all over again how we'd got into what we'd got into. When he left it was by stages, like an actor who overdoes the curtain calls. He bade farewell and a moment later he was back to fire off an overlooked last arrow in his bow – “And another thing ...”

His re-appearances grew steadily more distant until we figured he had gone for good and turned to the summons.

An element of farce was thus at the opening of the case of Buthelezi vs Beckett and this was prophetic.

In the mid-eighties the thing about “black spokesmen” was a gigantic issue. “Spokesmen” were pretty much anointed by the foreign press, who were only interested in known names like Winnie Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and *Frontline's* prize columnist Nthato Motlana ... These three were endlessly quoted

in the *Guardian*, the *New York Times*, etc, and then re-quoted by the Jo'burg papers quoting the foreign papers. To the media in-group any dissident black viewpoint was automatically inauthentic and one viewpoint in particular – Prince the Honourable Dr Buthelezi – was practically radioactive.

I carried no torch for Buthelezi but a one-way flood doesn't work for me. One day someone sent me an article from the (London) *Spectator* by one Stephen Robinson, with a scrawled anonymous note saying this was something different. So it was. I had never heard of this Robinson and suspected the name was a pseudonym, as was not uncommon when some journos wrote what they did think as opposed to what they were supposed to think.

Robinson was rude about every politician in sight including Buthelezi, who was “nauseatingly pompous” and whose “Impi regiments are among the most thuggish operators in South Africa”. But the thrust was a powerful antidote to the standard routine. The liberals were not mere pathetic joke figures; Tutu was not finally the fount of all wisdom; and Buthelezi, likeable or not, mattered. This was a nice challenge to conventional wisdom and for that reason I ran it.

I credited the *Spectator* and sent a copy to their editor, Charles Moore. This wasn't the most orthodox lifting procedure, but all small publications know that nobody gets upset about occasional judicious liberties.

I thought the liberation mafia might be unimpressed but at least Buthelezi, although not necessarily jumping for joy, would be pleased to have a small cudgel taken up for him. I underrated his legendary thinness of skin.

When NomaV and I opened the summons, for R20,000, I blew up. As I saw it, this was way out of order. I resolved on the spot that we would fight it to the end even if I had to do it myself, which, in light of counsel's fees, I probably would.

I put a small item in the next *Frontline* to say we'd be fighting it and to invite persons with evidence to come forth. A postal strike was on and mail was being delivered by white technicians

after hours. On a Sunday morning I walked down from the shops with a loaf of bread and the newspapers. As Gael and I brought breakfast to the front stoep a cheery Afrikaans teenager arrived at the gate, helping his dad with the rounds, and handed me our mail.

Fine, nice, there was my subscription copy of *Frontline*. I sent one to myself to monitor delivery; I hardly needed to read it. I took up the *Sunday Times* and saw a familiar short item in bold type under the heading “Apology: Dr MG Buthelezi”.

I started reading it, quite idly, taking it they’d paid the usual R5 000 as well. That was the media formula, though not made very public. Buthelezi demanded R20 000 and an apology. The offending organ offered R5 000 and an apology, and then it was all over until the next time. Obviously, the *Sunday Times* was on shaky ground, unlike the rock of truth that my case was about to rest on. But ... what exactly were they apologising for? Something by someone called Robinson... why did that ring a bell?

The lightbulb lit up s-l-o-w-l-y. They had published the same piece I had. I couldn’t exactly complain about that, since the lifting rights belonged to them. But ... first and foremost, how embarrassing! Them running my stuff was a doffing of the hat; me offering the same third-party material that they were offering was out! out! out! I think, I trust, I hope, this was the only time *Frontline* did any such thing.

Second, how in the blazes could they apologise? What was to apologise for? Nauseatingly pompous? C’mon, he’s proving the truth by the very act of suing for it. Thuggish Impis? C’mon, that was national reality, universally known.

The *Sunday Times* spoiled my breakfast, though there was a wryness in contemplating their 400 000 copies and my 10 000 touching down simultaneously. But they could do what they wanted to do. We had to do what we had to do. Five thousand or twenty, I didn’t have either but even if I did I wouldn’t have paid. My big worry was costs. I might forfeit lawyers but Buthelezi would not. If I lost I’d pay his costs.

Andy Duncan, *Frontline*’s honorary attorney and the

loyalest lawyer ever, talked me out of doing it myself on the blunt grounds that I would lose my temper and screw it up. Next thing, Edwin Cameron was counsel. Tactically speaking, this wasn't a brilliant move either. At that time Edwin – later to become famously unclosetedly gay – was semi-famous for attacking the Bench. I pictured the court seeing us coming and sniffing haughtily; phalanx of undesirables. But (a) Edwin was good, and up-and-coming, and anti-apartheid, and all, and (b) he wasn't very het up about how or if his fee might get paid.

It soon turned out we needn't worry about money, a novel experience. South Africa was full of deep lefty pockets spreading kronor to the side of the angels. *Frontline* had not been high in the queue, wayward thing that it was, but this was different. My enemy's enemy is my friend. If Gatsha is suing Beckett, Beckett has a halo, even if a scruffy one.

Defendant meetings and the rounding up of witnesses acquired quite some political flavour. I don't say that's a bad thing. If Party A burned my house down I'd soon get fond of Party B, but the kind of person coming to us tended to exude Anti-Gatsha Zealotry like mustard gas. Andy and I, who could picture horns and forked tail on the Plaintiff but did not believe he had a monopoly, were a minority on our own side.

This blew up from time to time, once following a specially harrowing tale of specially grim barbarity. There was silence, grim. Then one of the kindly people who had gathered to help ensure correct deployment of funds said: "I know this is a terrible thing to say, but if I had to choose between Gatsha's thugs and PW's thugs, I'd rather have PW's."

I said: "how about Oliver's thugs?" and uproar broke out. This was unforgivable, worse than nuking whales. Apology was demanded. I declined to oblige. I did not see one party's thugs as nicer thugs than another's; behaviour depends on the pressures. Also, though I couldn't properly explain it in the uproar, I had lost interest in who sat in which seat of power. All I wanted was a cast-iron basis. If we had the right basis it wouldn't matter who "ruled".

This was an area where ultra-democracy constantly got stuck. If you argue “politics”, people expect you to be for or against some group or ideology. I was arguing that the basis on which politics was conducted was unsound, and fixing it meant making it super-sound rather than less unsound.

But that’s the future. No-one on Buthelezi’s side was thanking me for my earnest theoretical justification of his right to a political existence, and many on my own side were scandalised. After a Defendant meeting in Pietermaritzburg, Buthelezi’s home turf, a group of activists offered a tour of the townships. It was a wonderful day and the skies were blue and the grass was thick and the mealies high, and things looked like how the world was meant to be, except for the burnt-out houses.

On the edge where Edendale township fades into rural KwaZulu, we walked a dusty track with green hills towering all round and tobacco-chomping peasants going about their peaceful business and greeting us with a courtesy that we take for granted and most of the west calls “old-world”, and came to a smashed settlement, newly destroyed. One of our guides showed the mealie-field where two bodies were found and the outhouse where the grandfather was slaughtered and the shed where the mother and two children met their ends, and so on.

It was pretty emotional and we squatted on rocks in silence for a calming smoke. A woman from one of the monitoring agencies said: “That’s what’s wrong with your theorising – the warlords.”

I said, “So how do you cope with violence?”

She said “Hit squads”.

I asked what stopped the hit squads turning into new warlords. She said when Inkatha was disposed of there’d be no further need for hit squads.

A row followed. To her, my approach was a distant luxury, for some time after the awfulness had been straightened out. To me, to cope with warlords you thrust power at the people, make the structures of order answer to voters, this afternoon preferably and tomorrow morning next best. Whatever structures answered

to the grandfather in the outhouse weren't good enough. For him it's too late but for his neighbour it's not. Smother him in order, order, all around, visible people in a fabric that envelops saints and envelops warlords too.

For the first day of the case the Durban Supreme Court was packed. The Inkatha team included Oscar Dhlomo, the heir-apparent, and Buthelezi's wife Princess Irene. If glares were lasers I'd have evaporated on the spot. Buthelezi was standing next to the dock with his secretary Eric Ngubane, and refused to shake my hand. I stood there holding it out like a tailor's dummy, and was not impressed. I couldn't then embarrass Ngubane by offering it to him, so we had a brief uptight conversation devoid of normal greeting. That would be odd anywhere but it was doubly odd in light of the extra weight attached to African handshakes and how-are-yous. Later Buthelezi thawed and we civilly agreed in the corridor on the strengths of Durban's colonial architecture.

This was the first of Buthelezi's defamation claims to come to judgment. Previously they had been settled or decided on technicalities. Even up to the last day I was enjoined to drop it. Over and over, well-wishers and trouble-avoiders and some of my advertisers urged me to "be wise" and to "consider the implications". I don't know what "wise" is. I did know I wasn't apologising for an honest critique of a combative politician. If you give it out you've got to take it. That's not only fairness, it is a clear part of libel law.

Buthelezi wasn't shy of handing out the brickbats. He must hold several records. I once heard him denounce Nthato Motlana at huge length at Jabulani in Soweto in front of thousands of foot-stomping men wielding weaponry. (I hotfooted to Motlana's house three kilometres away to warn him. Motlana laughed it off, asking if I expected him to live life on the run.)

One year Buthelezi's speech opening the KwaZulu Legislative Assembly took a week to deliver and was marked by character assassinations – of a defector from Inkatha, of the secretary of the Pietermaritzburg Chamber of Commerce, and of Oliver

Tambo, among others. I was now to say, “Oh please forgive, Noble Prince, my impertinence in publishing a wholly truthful item that mainly says you should be taken more seriously than you are”? No, thanks, and ditto to the “implications”, which in a lot of minds were tied to Buthelezi being White Man’s Favourite Black and the alternative to the ANC taking our houses and eating our babies.

Buthelezi took the stand for a day and a half. He talked about the size of his hat. The *Sunday Tribune* had run a lightweight item about a fellow who made politicians’ hats and had mentioned that Buthelezi’s hat was the biggest in the business. Buthelezi had replied with an indignant letter. Now he was suing me for being called pompous, so the letter became a factor and Edwin mined it all the way. It was no fun watching Buthelezi wriggle. I ducked out and took a long walk down the Parade or Esplanade or whatever funny word Durban calls the shore road at that point. There I saw a mudguard-crash. One minute, each driver was ready to kill the other. Next minute, passers-by and cyclists and rickshaw men and everyone was part of one of those peace-making love-ins at which South Africans beat the world, and I came back to court much restored in the real nation that lay beneath the posturing around the crust.

In the end we didn’t call any of the put-the-knife-in witnesses we had researched. We didn’t call me, either, and how the hell I agreed to that I cannot imagine, I think I was sleep-walking. Buthelezi withdrew the “pompous” complaint and won on “thug”. R12,000 damages. I couldn’t believe it, especially since the judgment seemed to me to turn law upside down, saying that since Buthelezi hobnobbed with kings he had greater rights against defamation than the ordinary Joe in the street.

For practical reasons I was sorely tempted to leave it at that but in principle I didn’t see how I could, so with reluctance I appealed and for another two years the thing hung over my head while we waited for the Appellate Division in Bloemfontein.

Everything about this case was perverse. I was spending my days and nights trying to talk an unhearing white society into

accepting that the blacks should be citizens too, and now I had created a new obstacle to my own aims. Among whites the idea prevailed that African leaders cannot tolerate criticism. “African politics” is supposed to be all about strength, tolerance being a weakness. Buthelezi’s suit came across as another forewarning, “See, if they get into power that’s the end of free speech.”

I didn’t see. All pronouncements on “the African way” are based on the ill-born structures of black rule that are called “democratic” by ex-colonial powers. They say nothing about the genuinely accountable society that is still waiting to be born. And anyway Buthelezi hadn’t even tried to use political power to thump me; plain ol’ civil law, who could ask for more?

After the trial – and before the judgment – I wrote to him to suggest no hard feelings whatever happened. I employed Zulu honorifics – Shenge and Ndabezitha – despite Nomavenda’s objections. She said it was fawning. I felt it was respectful to a guy who remains a dignified Zulu traditionalist no matter what. He never replied and he developed skill at failing to notice my presence at functions where we found ourselves in company – him, admittedly, invariably much surrounded. I aimed and claimed to keep the aggro stuff in its own compartment and to remain objective as an editor, selecting material by readability, novelty, crap-detection, etc, rather than by whose side it supported. I found limits. When someone submitted a marvellously readable, novel, crap-detecting, pro-Buthelezi article my head said I ought to publish it but my demon wrote a note to say “great piece, try the *Sunday Times*”.

Buthelezi’s lawsuit was one of four ways I ran foul of what was then called “the black leadership.” All, I felt, were instructive to the school of thought that claims black rule will end free speech.

When Desmond Tutu won the Nobel Prize for Peace I wrote an open letter saying that was nice and now could he get on with procuring the peace for which he’d got the prize. As you’ll guess, I wanted to urge him into exploring a peace-creating structure, rather than just saying “end apartheid”.

He sent me a short and aggrieved letter saying he was disappointed I had turned into another *Citizen*, so I went to speak to him. He was then Bishop of Johannesburg, in a quaint strange churchlet, St Albans, nestling between the back end of the financial sector and the minedumps.

I tried to talk him into structural ways of peace, but he was clear that his business was not theorising, it was upholding decent values and promoting reconciliation. I had the same problem with that as I have with white liberalism, it was decent but it was also hollow. Nice intentions don't do that much for the penury of the penurious or the exclusion of the excluded. But I think when you've just been anointed the world's chief peacemaker there is only so much listening you can do to some quibbling nobody talking in riddles. I gave up my mission for the occasion. We had tea and small-talk and he held my hand and prayed for me and said I wasn't a *Citizen* after all, even if he wasn't sure what I was. Spring was in my step when I left him.

With Lucas Mangope, President of Bophuthatswana, I had an appointment – set up by phone, confirmed by letter, reconfirmed by phone the day before. I spent eight hours in his waiting room, went home unseen, and wrote a snotty article about the wait. His press secretary, Kevin Kent, later engagingly told of the follow-up.

Kevin spent days honing a blistering letter which was going to put me firmly in my place, under a stone with the insects. He proudly gave it to Mangope for signature. Mangope glanced at it for half a moment and said, “Kevin, dear boy, you must learn when firmness is required” – he turned to lightly drop the letter in his wastebin – “and when it is not.”

Then I succumbed to a short (rare) dose of celebrity and published an item hinting at an affair between Bantu Holomisa, then the military dictator of the Transkei, and Zindzi Mandela. Some days later the phone rang. “This is General Holomisa in Transkei. Your article is not correct. The facts are as follows...” He spent maybe three businesslike minutes spelling it out. Then he said, “I have now given you correct information. What

you do with it is up to you. Good day.” That would be good behaviour if it came from a town councillor. From the head of a genuine card-carrying junta it must be a world record.

In the first session of the Buthelezi case a person who would fulfill a casting director’s every wish for a British public schoolboy had come up to introduce himself: Stephen Robinson.

Begob, the slightly purloined writer who had caused all the trouble. I had heard by now that he was real, and not the pseudonym I first expected, but he’d been long out of SA. Now he was back, as the *Telegraph’s* correspondent.

Stephen promptly wrote an article on the trial. His article that caused the trial had been good. His article about the trial was stunning – laughter and info and seeds of thought in one tumbling exuberant tangle. In one way, this was painful – once again, the outrageously best coverage of a South African issue is done by a Brit writer in a London newspaper. Tch! But then, perhaps it might at least appear before a local audience, too...

This time I did it by the book, nearly, procuring proper permission albeit short-circuiting the proper channels via Stephen. I regretfully elided some hilariously backhanded, but basically complimentary, references to myself. I half expected another summons from Ulundi but it never came. Then I commissioned Stephen to write something directly for *Frontline*: lift the lid on the foreign correspondents’ circus.

Stephen delivered with a vengeance, taking cracks at everybody and everything including the gap between the interpretations that the correspondents wrote in their reports and the interpretations that they spoke in the bars.

The article appeared anonymously and caused a rumpus. The correspondents fingered Stephen soon enough, most with a wink but some with glowers. I anticipated any number of possible consequences, from every conceivable source other than the one I got.

Johnny Johnson, editor of the *Citizen*, sued for R50 000.



Bomb Season

IN THE EIGHTIES THE CARLTON WAS KING OF HOTELS AND Richard Smith was king of cartoonists. I asked Richard for a cover picture showing the way we least wanted things to go. He picked on the Carlton and laid it in ruins, burnt-out and shelled, the bluntest future-scary I ever saw. It gave me a fright.

Mind, it gave everyone a fright, but mostly they could take two whiskeys and put it behind them. I had to answer a question: could I consciously inflict 10,000 crumbling Carltons upon the world?

The edition could be banned for that, and advertisers would run. But... it was too good not to publish, so with heart in mouth and the slogan “A Future That Must Not Be” it illustrated my first cover-story in the direction-finding field. I don’t know that anyone was struck by the direction-finding – that piece looks so primitive now that you wouldn’t believe it had once been pioneering – but plenty of people were struck by the picture.

There were several offers for the original but Richard wanted

to keep it. Fair enough. Years later, apropos of nothing I could understand, he suddenly gave it to me. He did me more of a favour than he realised. I framed it and hung it on my wall, and on glum days when invoices were high and I asked myself why I was doing what I was doing, Richard's Carlton gave an answer.

However, avoiding apocalypse ceased to be the target. I got more ambitious. One could avoid apocalypse and still live in turmoil. Once upon a time I took turmoil for granted, and thought the task was to keep turmoil to sub-apocalyptic levels. This was a target that people might identify with, but the longer we lived in sub-apocalyptic turmoil the more I admired Kris Kristofferson's "I've enjoyed about as much of this as I can stand", and the quest moved a notch up: it was not for less turmoil. It was for no turmoil.

By the mid eighties I'd look charily at every pavement dustbin I walked past. Most urban citizens did the same because the things frequently exploded. Then the council cut them down. Men in dustcoats with wirecutters stomped the pavements clipping each bin off its lamppost and tossing it in to a City Engineer's truck. Here was symbolic decline for you. An anti-litter campaign was on the go, featuring an ostrich speaking in pidgin. "Zappit in the Zibi can" said the ostrich, towering from billboards. Only there weren't any Zibi cans. Binless city. The bomb merchants transferred their attentions to shopping centres. Then we got new bins. The old ones had been round and metal, with a hole at the top as God intended so you could drop in your Bar One wrapper without collecting the last guy's fish-oil on your sleeve. The new ones were rectangular with a lip designed to foil passing bomb-droppers. You had to push stuff in, which lots of people didn't do; they let it fall in mounds of litter below the litterbin. The inadequacy of politics was making my country not only neurotic but scruffy as well.

Every family had a dozen almosts. Deirdre was parked near the Magistrate's Court, delayed for an appointment. Two bombs went off when she should have been walking past. When the police let her collect her car a day later, the mirror fell off as she

opened the door. Someone in the same lot started his engine and the windscreen dribbled delicately onto his lap. Gael parked outside the Joubert Street Wimpy at lunch-time on a Wednesday. Lunch-time on the Thursday the place blew up. The Mitchell Cotts building, a stolidly elegant edifice two blocks from my office, was hit so hard that it had to be condemned. We're a nation on guard duty, while if your house is burgled the only reason to call the cops is to meet the insurance formalities.

For my family, turmoil has been mainly vicarious. Late one night I was cursing the yap of a neighbour's dog when the phone rang. It was a frightened friend of Gael's, in Soweto. Both of us tried to counsel her, against percussion in the background. Rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat, rat-a-tat-a-tat, BOOM. The echoes of Soweto gunfire blasted over the phone while the dog's sins next door paled to insignificance.

Then we had a bomb warning at Dunwell. Police chased everyone out and we clustered on the opposite pavement, where if there had been a bomb we'd be showered with glass. After half an hour, action happened. Movement! In the foyer! We held our breath. We blinked. Operation Hunger's Ina Perlman was stepping out of the building.

Tiny Ina, five foot nothing, at least two conversations at once, never less than two Benson & Hedges burning the ridges of her ashtray, had in her head-down way ignored the shouting and calling and sirens and whistles. She emerged unwitting, perceived frivolous people playing some game across the road, and tottered away unconcerned, behind her customary head-high armload of files. Bomb scare cancelled.

One day I was waiting in my office for Aubrey Mokoena, of the Release Mandela Committee and a dozen other ANC fronts. A blast shook the floorboards and I went to enquire. A pantry in the Devonshire Hotel had been hit. It was an odd sight. Some fragile wine glasses were intact in their racks half a metre away from a set of heavy steel burglar bars mangled into sculpture. A waitress was reeling into walls, eyes blank and jaw hanging. I tried incompetently to help but admirable people

who knew first aid took over. The social rules were suspended. Strangers talked to each other, commiserating, lamenting, communicating. Then there were sirens and police and dogs and ropes.

When I got back Aubrey had come and gone. He was a stickler for time, Aubrey. If you had an appointment for nine and pitched up at five past he'd pull back his sleeve and scrutinise his watch.

Aubrey had tolerated my ideological failings better than many of his comrades. He nibbled at super-democracy and that was what this meeting was about. We'd agreed to thrash it out until one of us persuaded the other. Optimistic, but not a bad thing to try.

Next time I saw Aubrey was after *Frontline* published Nomavenda's expose of Winnie Mandela, in May 1987. Aubrey wasn't talking to me any more, or to Nomavenda. Whenever either of us saw him he shook his head and held up his hand in do-not-accost-me style. Which has something to be said for it. Several of his colleagues congratulated us in private but wouldn't be seen in our company.

I never spoke to Aubrey again, though I once visited his office (in Portland Place, next door) in strange and sickening circumstances.

Long before, I had started a story about car theft. Why were cars stolen? In the electronic age surely police should pick them up like jam, through terminals at border posts or roadblocks? I asked the head of Vehicle Theft. He said he wouldn't know about that. His job was to catch the thieves after they stole the car. Nor could he comment on the efficacy of deterrents – gearlocks, alarms, etc – because that would be State interference in the private sector.

I started the story but distractions arose. When Gael's little blue Escort became our seventh car to go walkabout, I tried again and I got a captain who deserves medals. I spent half a day in his office at the east end of John Vorster Square, next to the stairwell where the toilets were. He demonstrated tools

ranging from crude jemmies to intricate technomarvels, and then invited me to go with him to a trial.

The accused were three Mozambicans, in custody. One was Marlon Brando's double, though in a black skin. In a break, at the captain's request, he told me he'd had a great racket supplying stolen cars from SA to receivers in Zimbabwe. One day he got a tip-off to a big, new, rich client in Harare, and he and henchmen went to visit. Unfortunately the big, new, rich, client had also received a tip-off – that a black man looking like Marlon Brando was trying to lure them into a SA police trap. And the big, new, rich client, being a sabotage unit of the ANC, was not very amused.

The Vehicle Theft captain rejoiced in the re-telling of this story and was proud of his role in the tip-off plot. Brando was extraordinarily relaxed about it, at least outwardly. What bugged him was: “the Zimbabwe police didn't believe us. Six months we rotted in their shithole prison telling them we were just decent innocent car thieves”.

A while later a bomb blew up in a toilet at John Vorster. A policeman was injured, my car-theft captain. That night a firebomb hit Aubrey Mokoena's office. I called in next day and it was like walking through a swamp. What the fire hadn't destroyed, the fire-hoses had. Half Aubrey's files were ash and the other half were welded into sodden blocks. Aubrey was under sedation and the captain's family were taking flowers to hospital and I was revolted. Aubrey and the captain would be okay with each other, or at least not trapped in a bombing war, were it not for the flaw at the core. The flaw at the core bred bad things.

Ending apartheid would mean fewer bad things, but to breed good things would need real democracy. It was self-evident to me, blinding. But whenever I said so I was told “be real, we have half a century of violence ahead”. The way out would not transmit. Whites said that ordinary majority rule was the seventh hell and to want more of it must be eighth hell. Liberationists said that majority rule was their property and they'd be the ones to tell us what it meant.

Nomavenda and I took a trade unionist, Phandelani Nefolovodvhw, to lunch at the worst restaurant I ever visited. NomaV selected it on the grounds that nobody was about to worry about anybody's complexion, down the bottom end of Commissioner Street. Classier places, you couldn't be sure. This one was anyway too dark to see anyone's complexion. Nor what you were eating, which was probably beneficial to peace of mind. I got stuck with a bill to make the Three Ships look modest, but being there was worth it for Nef's insistence that liberation wouldn't be liberation unless I ended up losing.

We went through dozens of ways that I was supposed to lose my enjoyment of life – material, mental, psychological, the lot. I agreed that unbearable possibilities might – might – happen if there was a simplistic swap from a white tyranny to a black tyranny, but none were on the cards if freedom meant actual power in the actual hands of ordinary people. Nef said that ordinary people would definitely vote for courses that hurt me; he should know, he spoke for the people.

I said I knew that when the microphones were off he moaned like mad that the people were apathetic. He was shocked and said how did I know that, like I'd been reading his mail. I said all liberationists do that.

Nef started to get a bit huff-and-puff but NomaV, who never agreed with a syllable of my politics but was fair-minded to the end, swung to my side. She hammered Nef to admit that Mr Average could get as angry with the comrades who mess up this life to change the system as with the system that messed up his life in the first place, and most times he's not angry with either.

Nef took refuge in the sad story that after liberation people would have re-education to clear their oppressed heads before they voted. I don't know how seriously he meant this but it killed debate.

To me it's absolute that anybody votes any way they want for any reason they like. If it's anchored well enough we could all be lunatic; it'd still work out. You don't need to ask people

to argue, argument is good; it takes you places. You just need a basis that makes the outcome constructive.

The arguments I was getting into about how to have better arguments were taking me terrific places. I'd thought the South African dilemma was half tragedy and half farce but I was learning better; it was mainly delusion.

12

Lonely Podiums

PEACE IS MY TARGET. I DECLARE MY PREJUDICE. PEACE, I LEARNED, is not that obvious a prejudice and by no means a universal target. “What about Justice!? Restitution!? Protection!? Privilege!? Equality!?”

For me, peace is paramount and if you take peace seriously the rest comes naturally. Nail the fierce to the ratification of the little men with sofas to pay off and children to educate and mealies to grow, and you get peace whether you like it or not. Nobody votes himself into war with his neighbour. If conflicts are great, add more nails.

But peace created awful heat. I tried speaking peace, wherever I could. I went to proselytise a Soweto discussion group called Community Affairs Forum – CAF, a little unfortunate since “kaf” is Afrikaans for “nonsense” and one was continually reminded. Madikolo Motumi, the director of the National Organisation of Women, took the cake against strong competition. I was “just the same as the AWB’s Eugene Terre’Blanche”, as I wanted to

protect the whites from the suffering which was their due. Blood had flowed in the townships; now it must flow in the suburbs to even things out. I mustn't come with white man's talk about systems and structures and boring technicalities; liberation must come and oppression must stop and I must just "take my government and go, go".

I grasped a lull to sneak a word in and said: "You know who you guys should blame for your oppression?" The predictable roar went out: "The whites!" I said "No, yourselves, and if this is the best you can offer you'll be oppressed forever". Pandemonium. Blood vessels popping like firecrackers at Guy Fawkes.

Twenty minutes later, proceedings over, there's tea and biscuits and everybody's moved out of political mode and back into normality. They're swopping sorrowful tales about how so-and-so's niece was raped and somebody else's neighbour's son was press-ganged and how badly the restoration of order is needed.

There you have it, I tell Madikolo. That's why people need power over their lives. Her, too – give her effective citizenship and she'll be a force for stability like all those other mothers and aunts and fathers. Madikolo laughs. She wants change, she says, change, to the blazes with stability.

That's what she says but she's fooling herself. When she can cast a ballot that matters she'll cast a ballot for calm. She might rant over dinner tables but at the voting booth she'll be thinking of peace. Or if she wants to play Warrior Queen, that's fine. Just let her get Warrior Queendom past voters, that's all. "Hey, remember chaos? The whites never had their time of chaos. Vote for me so we can put the suburbs in chaos."

I addressed Manas Buthelezi's diocese, gentle men in dark suits, full to the brim with politeness and the Good Book. Half of them nodded off, wondering what my theorising had to do with the Word of the Lord, but they all woke up and clapped fit to burst at the end. That must be the ultimate black custom; make the guest feel good no matter what. Whereas among the

English establishment the ethic is to look as bored as possible; showing interest is for the lower classes. The Boere fit inbetween, which is the way that South Africa works on the whole. Look at companies. In the in-crowd English outfits it's first names from the word go. If you ask for Mr Smith or Miss Jones they take you for a carpet salesman. In Afrikaans companies you don't even think of first-naming your boss, and in black ones you know him only by his praise-name and you go without a murmur when he sends you for cigarettes.

Manas's ministers were unhappy to a man – some about the police; some about zabalaza, the Struggle; most about both and all about their impotence. Their impotence was what I was talking about. I was saying their impotence sprang from the great South African mistake, and that they could take it in hand. I said they need to build a notion of a liberation that really meant liberation, rather than the simple swop usually perceived. One said, "It's okay for you to talk like that, but if we do we get arrested." Another, "We can't do that, or the comrades will accuse us of selling out".

Manas's guys at least responded to the self-interest factor. As per convention they did not believe in a pale mouth saying roll on one man one vote. It had to be a plot or a trick. I had a surge of eloquence that day, making the case that my personal self-interested life would work better with a mass of black people exercising the vote than a mass of black people fighting for the right to vote. At the end one guy said, "This is better than ..." and he put on heavy mimicry of a white liberal accent, "... Oh you poor poor people, we do so empathise with you", and cheers filled the air.

My racism heresies, too, went down better in this kind of circle. My head lived in the society I wanted more than in the society that existed, and in the society I wanted race was no big deal. Where cohesion was important to people – Jews or Muslims or whites or Afrikaners or Zulus or Hare Krishnas or whoever – ways would be worked out, possibly at a cost; if your neighbours felt you turned your back to them, build them

a creche and see if that reduced their grudge. Your standard white liberal audience would gasp and rend garments and expect lightning to strike, but among blacks I'd say, "Wouldn't you like some place that you never need talk in English about cricket and non-racialism?" That line never failed.

Everything else failed wholesale. You could see the thought-bubbles, "What is this? It's not ANC, it's not PAC, it doesn't even sound Prog. Must be bogus". Worst, it didn't hold out neat turnabout, and to a lot of black people neat turnabout was the name of the liberation game.

Nomavenda had been much in the turnabout category, bred to know that the whites had stolen the land, one day the blacks would take it back, then things would be rosy. To me this had the same value in practice as saying return Manhattan to the Indians, and in principle as saying the land belonged to the bushmen. NomaV and I fought these things, sometimes taking diametrically opposite lines from the same platform. People rubbed their eyes when we got into the same car and went off amicably.

In the office one day NomaV talked of living in a lightless Soweto. This was during a rent boycott, when officialdom was trying to jog payment along by cutting off water and electricity at unexpected times for uncertain intervals. She graphically described driving at dusk along the ruts which pass for roads, blinded by oncoming headlights, pedestrians weaving across your path.

I was reminded that our own street light was out. It didn't matter much, as there was a light a little way down the road and another one a little way up the road. NomaV was fairly distraught and I had a wicked thought. As she was talking I reached for the phone book and dialled the city council.

NomaV fell silent. I reported the light and the guy said it'd be fixed within 24 hours. She only heard my side, of course, but she got the gist. When I put the phone down I gave her an as-you-were-saying gesture. She got up and walked out.

A little later she barged back in tears. "Why do you rub my

nose in your privilege?” she shouted. I said I was demonstrating what citizenship was about. She should be able to do the same, but she wasn’t going to do it in a hurry by waiting for a revolution to break out. Even if she got her revolution she’d wind up, when she phoned, if the phone worked, and if it was answered, speaking to someone appointed for services to the cause instead of qualities for the job, who’d write her address wrong and wouldn’t have a light-fixer to send, or a light-bulb.

We had the fiercest argument ever, and in my view NomaV turned a corner. I dunno if she’d agree/admit.

Corner-turning was rare all round. If you speak to a group for 40 minutes you may adjust the lines of their thought-tracks, but I don’t think you’re about to install new tracks, and I learnt that this was what I was trying to do.

Among politically-minded black groups, there was enormous disgust of reassurances to the whites. Partly of course there was the (dumb) idea that whites must just bugger off. More, there was the (fair) smell of insult coming up, another variation of half-liberation. There’s a wall of gut resistance. A guy wants to be a citizen, complete, not a semi-citizen granted his status on condition he doesn’t use it in ways which offend the white man.

To me all the reassurance formulas belonged in the dustbin; all the special powers for minorities, all the appeals for promises of future good behaviour. Just let liberation go further than was sought, to be chained to the people for whom it spoke. But this was perhaps a bit much to wrap the mind around in 40 minutes, especially to people convinced that “black interests” and “white interests” were distinct and opposing entities.

“Non-political” black audiences had a different problem. They’d hear me to be saying that the lives they wanted were within reach, and would get excited as well as mystified. They’d say, “So what do we do now”, and I’d say, “Well, it requires the developing and floating of an improved concept of liberation”, and as I was saying it I’d know it was hopeless. People wanted the crisp and concrete, not a vague injunction to change a nation’s thinking.

Among white people, universal franchise was shoot-on-sight terrain. Somehow I got to speak to a Witbank public servants club. I sat between the postmaster and the police commandant. We chatted amicably until I went to the rostrum to put in my half-hour on why their problems derive from the absence of full citizenship. After that the chairman apologised for my presence and I spent the rest of lunch in solitude, two large official backs pointedly turned to me.

Most times there were some yes-but comments, afterwards. Occasionally I'd hear echoes later. In unexpected places such as a queue for a parking-lot cashier, someone would accost me, quite often with blame: "I believed you, for a while. What happened? Where did that stuff go? You suckered me."

The chief spanner in the works was the Africa factor, obviously. "Look at Africa! The blacks get the vote and see what happens." To me the logic was immaculate: the mess of Africa stemmed not from the acquisition of the vote but from the ineffectiveness of the vote. Did the butchers and bakers of Mozambique want a murderous civil war? Did the peasants and proletarians of Uganda ask for Idi Amin and his Research Unit? Logically the "look at Africa" crowd should be the first to jump at my case, but logic is a flimsy thing against the steamroller of Other People's Failings.

I got letters:

"You do not seem to realise that democracy is foreign to Africa."

"I do not understand how you expect our blacks to behave responsibly when the proven history of Africa is destruction and shambles."

"The black man does not understand democracy. He wants to rule alone and is not interested in sharing."

I was saying white fear was of rudimentary democracy; thorough democracy was the remedy. It came across like saying that to get over fear of flying, try parachuting.

Whites saw change as violence, Robespierre and Dr Zhivago and all; tumbrils for the pale people. I saw the mama on the

Orlando bus, as represented by Gogo Lindiwe the office cleaner.

Gogo had her fingers on the Struggle triggers, it seemed. When one of her neighbours became a Soweto councillor, a *corrablator*, she denounced him as loud as anyone (though she sent her sons with buckets when his house was set on fire.) Her phobia was Africans speaking to each other in English. I once saw Muntu Myeza – big hefty in-charge main-man Black Consciousnik, later to die in a suspicious car-crash – sheepishly submit to a Respect Your Language lecture from chest-level Mrs Mop with Standard Four.

But Gogo's view of the *siyayinyovas*, the comrades who threw stones through bus windows on stayaway days, made successive Ministers of Police look pansy, and her attitude to public administration was brutal. Every new problem to report – phone out of order, trains running late, glitch in furniture payments – she had the same explanation, “They must have put an African in charge”. Once at a seminar a very verbal character was waxing heavy on the changes to come, like 80% of all offices being held by blacks. NomaV whispered, “he can't have met Gogo”.

I wondered. I wasn't confident of Gogo getting much look-in. I certainly wasn't able to get my story across to the Gogos. In fact, I was getting my story across less and less, to anyone. Where there'd been a certain glamour to a young independent maverick editor addressing your annual Awards Night, there was no glamour in monomaniacs with missions.

I had sought to get message across, and had acquired a wardrobe full of institutional ties. Eventually I was paying my own petrol schlepping to speak to people who wondered who let this guy in. It would be nice to say that I phased myself out of the speakers' circuit and it's part true. The bigger part is that the circuit did some phasing-out of its own.

I had tried getting big-shot champions. I had tried for a rise from the grassroots. I had the ties and the petrol bills. That damn drawing-board again.

13

Micawber's Fingers

DAMON RUNYON HAS A CHARACTER CALLED THE SKY, FOR whom life was about playing games of chance. Dollars were things to play, not things to accumulate. He only thought of money when he was broke, and he only knew he was broke when he “put his hand in his pocket and found nothing there but his fingers”.

Runyon is like Guinness, you need your head held in before the tastebuds waken. My dad held my head in both, so that in the eighties when the revolutionaries told me of the imminent death of my privileges I pictured a commissar depriving me of Runyon and of Guinness.

I said that to Joe Thloloe, deputy editor of the *Sowetan*. I thought it was funny. Joe said, no, that's right, every bit of added unhappiness erodes the whites' will to govern.

They could deprive me of Guinness, and so they did, for several years in the sanctions era. They couldn't deprive me of Runyon, who died on the day I was born and who, with

Shakespeare, lives in my head through phrases, like The Sky knowing he's broke when he finds nothing in his pocket but his fingers.

In *Frontline's* youth I made a good pretence of managing the finances, but as hair grew greyer and trousers tighter and temper shorter the pretence wore thin. I'd got into writing in order to write. The arithmetic was supposed to understand that. The late great advocate Ernie Wentzel often said that if he was a millionaire he'd pay me to write all day, but Ernie died before he got there and there was a shortage of living millionaires with the same admirable philosophy.

Frontline channeled money from advertisers to printers and I operated on the Micawber principle. Twenty shillings in and 19/11 out meant happiness, but mainly it was 19/11 in and 20 shillings out. When debtors' prison loomed I would gird the loins and knock on charitable doors. In eleven years I took four hand-outs – two from Anglo American, one from the Ford Foundation and one from the U.S. National Endowment for Democracy. None of these were vast – I think around a quarter-million rands in total. By the standards of social interest projects this was virtual self-sufficiency. But *Frontline* wasn't meant to be a "project". It was meant to be a business, and one thing I learned about business is that it is not good policy for a chief executive to share any portion of the Sky's philosophy.

It might have worked with a full-scale kick-off but that is a thing we never had, despite an extremely near miss. At one stage Nasionale Pers was about to take 50%. I did not keep this a deep dark secret – for which I'm not sorry, secrets don't work for me – and someone wrote in the Rand Daily Mail that I was selling to Nasionale and "slavish adherence to the National Party". That was a bit of slavish liberal cant that won me a bunch of cancelled subs but did not worry my conscience. My mission was tackling the government, not its ankle-biters. Ton Vosloo, Nasionale's chairman, certainly wasn't offering me lift-off in order to silence my voice. This deal reflected an opening of Nasionale as well as a new league for *Frontline*. It was magnificent.

Well, would have been. After the RDM article *Nasionale* had second thoughts. Later we had a management contract with *The Star*. Jolyon Nuttall, now the general manager (title-inflation had caught up with *The Star*), made heroic personal efforts but *The Star's* mighty machinery did not easily adjust to an extra gnat in the works. It didn't help that monomania stung at the same time and I snuck behind my new, first, word processor to write another democracy book.

Frontline's borderline identity wasn't the sole reason I found nothing in my pocket but my fingers, but it helped. Eddie Botha of *Rapport* was one day on the phone to a government hot-shot (I know who, but he's a nice guy, now, and he gets extremely upset by this story, so I'll call him D) who said, "Sorry, hold on a moment, I have to take the other line". Eddie then calmly listened in while D firmly told someone called Hennie that it was unwise and unpatriotic to advertise in *Frontline*.

Hennie Klerk ran Klerk, Marais and Potgieter, agency for inter alia Federale Volksbeleggings, the deliciously improbable advertiser who *Frontline* displayed with huge pride, and thanks to a career-risking exec, Anton Roodt.

Once at police HQ Lester Venter of the *Sunday Times* watched a Special Branch general demonstrate the onslaught against civilisation by pulling treasonable literature out of a box. The general whipped out journal after journal and flung them on the floor in disgust. *Sechaba*, the ANC mag; *Ikwezi*, the PAC's; *African Communist*, which used to come in a wrapper marked "Wild Life"; and on he went. Then he pulled out a *Frontline* and flung it down in the same disgust.

Lester said: "Scuse me, isn't that one a bit different?"

The officer retrieved the copy. This edition happened to be more than a bit different; its cover asked loudly, "Who's Listening to the White Workers?" The general contemplated it with narrowed eyelids and then, said Lester, flung it again, saying, "Man, they try to confuse us but we're too bright."

After Gencor's ads stopped, Niel Ackermann at their head office told me he'd found out that I was in the pay of "an Eastern

government". Eskom converted an article I wrote on nuclear energy into a booklet and then took a series in *Frontline*. The ads were cancelled and the manager who had booked them, Chuck Thal, was reprimanded for bringing Eskom into disrepute. In a single month Admiral Evert Groenewald of Submarine Command saw (a) *Frontline* identified at Defence College as a weapon of creeping communism, and (b) a memo from Defence Headquarters commending a *Frontline* article.

This article travelled far and wide in the military. It was by Helmoed-Römer Heitman, who in his cool logical manner set out a series of reasons why conscription was a good thing.

Heitman was an editor's delight, like Andrew Kenny. If either said they were producing on Tuesday week, on Tuesday week the piece arrived with zero spelling errors, zero sloppy literals, and zero waste of words. Both of them stirred the pot, Heitman on military and police and Kenny on energy and much else. Neither were journalists – Heitman owned the car parks on Cape Town's foreshore and Kenny was an engineer. Neither could be bulldozed into writing anything. They wrote when the spirit moved them and when it moved them it moved them good.

Heitman's conscription article changed more minds than any article I ever knew. Now, it may be old news that armies behave better if they're full of people who don't want to be there. Then it was retch news, especially to pale persons with teenage sons. My own son was 6 months old and I felt the retch too, and terrible grim chill at the prospect that when he was 18 in 2003 we might still be fighting off majority rule.

It wasn't surprising that the army swiped that piece, but they might have done it decently, or even merely legally. This wasn't a case of making a copy for a friend; they printed thousands. I could have sued them; should have. Instead I sent a friendly letter. They didn't have the grace to reply.

Heitmans and Kennys notwithstanding, *Frontline* had said let there be one-person-one-vote, and that was the ultimate shibboleth of unforgiveable leftism. The righty onslaught rolled on and weirdly on. An Indian cafe owner in Middelburg

protested that distributors kept giving him three *Frontlines* though he'd told them he didn't do communist literature. The University of Pretoria censored their Rag Mag for lifting (with permission, unlike the army) a spoof article on SA attitudes (from "My Bantus prefer it like this", to "I don't like the Hairybacks because they're so racist on the Afs").

Years later a journalist, Colleen Ryan, now in Australia, got access to Beyers Naude's Department of Justice file for a biography and found in it a bunch of misfiled papers on me, which she gave me. I was stupefied; there was amazingly close-up info in there, movies I'd been to, people I'd visited, and there was imaginary stuff – not exaggerated, imaginary – about links and allies I never heard of.

Along the way I also received an anonymous S E C R E T police memo telling Minister of Justice Alwyn Schlebusch that "although FRONTLINE prints the views of all sections, contributions from the Black Consciousness section and also, to lesser extent, the radical anti-white section of the community by far exceeds that of the section with the opposite sentiments". Moreover, I "consistently associated with radical and leftist personalities".

So my stocks are high among radical and leftist personalities, right? No-o. Helen Joseph her saintly self told all and sundry over and again that I was a paid secret agent of the Nat reformists, reporting direct to Pik Botha. I couldn't get properly mad at someone whose life was lived in permanent house arrest, but I was tempted.

In a way I was glad that the slander-stories were two-handed. Why, I'm not sure. It's not logical. Lefties' hearts are often in a right place and Righties' hearts are mainly not, but getting it from both sides vouched for a freedom, of sorts.

Which Trevor Tutu memorably punctured. At a party in Melrose, Trevor, son of the Arch and a fun fellow despite his bad press, said archly: "Denis, I'm sure you're told that if both Right and Left dump on you you're doing something good". I blushed with due modesty and said, yes, sure. Trevor leaned

close and hissed in my ear: “Both Right and Left dump on PW Botha too, did you ever think of that?”

Trevor is an excellent reason to want a sound foundation and to want it now. The first time I met him was at a soccer final where we were joint guests in a company box. It was Pirates/Chiefs as usual, and it happened that our host’s box was behind Pirates’ territory. Pirates was the “working class” club, supported by solid wage-earners who wore hats and turn-ups. Chiefs was glamour and crossover, for the trendy and the upwardly mobile. Trevor and several other guests were rooting for Chiefs. They saw themselves in friendly competition with the Pirates fans on the other side of the rail; all fun in the spirit of the sport.

Except that Pirates didn’t know about fun in the spirit of the sport. They were there to win. Growing numbers of angry Pirates turned back and glowered. Then Chiefs scored. Glowers turned to pointed fingers and then to shaking fists. I realised with shock that these were directed at one person: Trevor, the sole indigenous African face.

Chiefs scored again. Trevor and Co did a jig of jubilation. The Pirates started climbing up over their seats, making for him with violence in their eyes.

Fortunately the kick-off was prompt. Further jubilation was not expressed.

I suppose that potential violence goes with soccer fans. Maybe people will forever beat people up for shouting for the wrong side. But not for being the wrong colour and shouting for the wrong side. Trevor was a further spur to find the sound foundation; the one that lets a black person be ‘black’ if he wants or ‘person’ if he wants, or any combination, unchained.

However, the sound foundation wasn’t moving noticeably forward and nor was *Frontline*. The *Weekly Mail* had come along, providing actual news and abundantly grabbing the mantle of new journalism. Leon and Frances Louw had cornered the alternatives market, not least by boldly calling their call for Swiss cantons “The Solution”. Hugh Murray’s *Leadership*

magazine had stolen precisely the leadership part – lucratively, too, though a tad pompously as well. I learned that in the business world life is perceived as a contest, where if you're not beating other people other people are beating you. In my view plain getting-along is fine, better than either beating or being beaten. *Frontline* had been *Front* for a long innings, even if not the highest of scores. Now I was the poor man's *Leadership*, the poor man's *Weekly Mail*, and the poor man's Leon Louw, suddenly and all in one. It was disorienting.

With the Louws I shared two things. We sought to make the place better instead of wallowing in how it got to be bad, and we worked on the theme of power belonging with frail flawed fallible mortals, us, the people with a small 'p'.

It astonishes me that privileged people rage at the idea of less privileged people having an equal vote. They insist it means the unwashed mass “dragging us down”. That's a gross mistake, as De Tocqueville made clear with his thesis on democracy giving people a “lofty view of themselves and their nation”. That was radical in 1835, but a century and a half later it should have worn in. No, flat-earthers dominate the dinner-tables, forever pronouncing that when the vote “is given” to those who haven't “earned” it you get “mob rule”.

Voters never in fact bring mob rule to the ballot box, not even in the rawest democracy. But the fuller the democracy is, the more remote the mob. Support for an extreme drives counter-support to the other extreme and disrupts the peace of the person on the bus, so majorities vote moderately. You don't ask them to, let alone “educate” them to; just be sure that the vote is re-usable and has visible effects.

On that, the Louws and I are in harmony. But not much further. I saw the Switzerland model as an artificial escape-hatch, and I'd say so when asked. Frances and Leon's spirit of love and old friendship curdled a bit at times, and debates could become snippy. Our best debate, perversely, was in an American magazine which said this was part of the “frenetic search for solutions currently under way in South Africa”. Ha.

That we were in an American magazine was because no South African one would waste space on crackpots. Bloodcurdle was the order of the day; guilt and comeuppance.

1989's Sunday Times non-fiction award went to White Tribe Dreaming. The CNA fiction prize was White Boy Running, and Dry White Season was the film to see. That's the formula: how our yesterdays were dramatically screwed up. You wouldn't queue for a movie about how our tomorrows might be boringly stable. That is "denial". People take offence, with vehemence

Even worse, the pool in which these arguments rage is tiny. Personal factors are raw, especially the factor that no-one you know should steal a march on you. At an Investec lunch in Fox Street when the Louws' book was galloping off shelves, the guest speaker was a respected personage, J, whose deep, wide, thorough, profound, address went down well. Then he was asked what he thought of the book. His face contorted, he snarled, he went apeshit. The poor investment bankers thought he was having an attack. Maybe he was: Leon and Frances were criminal buffoons who would be better off in bricklaying, anyone who paid them any attention needed a straitjacket, their book should be burned on sight ...

I perceived that the Louws' sin was not to have proposed a direction that J did not approve but to have hopped, in the public mind, onto the guru platform that belonged to him. That was sobering. So much for the frenetic search for solutions currently under way in South Africa. J and I had arrived at the same time and he had been polite about Permanent Peace – "sound thinking", "valid contribution" and equivalent non-committals. As he ranted on I realised he had no idea what it said but was fine with it because it hadn't caught on. One can contemplate bricklaying.

14

Double Talk

TONY SUTTON GAVE ME A ROLLING STONE ARTICLE ON KOREA, with a byline I didn't know: PJ O'Rourke.

This was a masterpiece, the kind of writing you're sorry to reach the end of, and immediately turn back and start again. Writing like that is what floats my boat: I have to publish it. I did publish it. I sent *Rolling Stone* a copy, with thanks and hopes that they wouldn't mind, and invited PJ to apply his beady eye to the tip of Africa.

Too late. He had already done so. His article appeared soon after, and was a disappointment. He'd rounded up every cliché in the book and presented them as features of his first-hand experience. I'd relished O'Rourke's account of a place I didn't know. When I saw his account of a place I did know I smelled truth and accuracy being subordinated to the need for a slick phrase.

O'Rourke described Afrikaners as: "no-account people". Say that of Armenians, Xhosas, bricklayers, Parisians, you'd get

shock, horror and lawsuits. Say it of Afrikaners, who more than most of the world's peoples agonise over role and meaning, and not an eyelid bats.

Our former neighbour Koos le Roux thought it should be a capital offence to advocate one-man-one-vote. But when a hit-and-run left an old black labourer lying in the street it was Koos who brought tourniquet and brandy and got blood on his clothes. He'd be called no-account, no doubt, if you heard him speak.

Beyers de Klerk, the Rightie mayor of Boksburg, had a lunch for twelve card-carrying Righties and two others, being myself and an ex-Mr South Africa who had to flex his biceps for all to feel. Beyers introduced me as a madman who wanted to give the blacks the vote, so all the Righties had to correct me, all afternoon. When I left it hit me that only one of them was disparaging of blacks. The rest were no more obnoxious than your professedly anti-apartheid English-speaker; indeed; perhaps more respectful. But they, saying "if you start reform you cannot stop", were dismissed as troglodytes and no-accounts. Mr Anti-Apartheid Voter, saying "have some reform but not too much", was treated as morally superior.

I was not arguing that Righties were misunderstood saints, but that if their fears were addressed they may be no worse than anyone else. Of course, that smacked of asking for promises from the ANC; dreary and lame. What I meant was building a structure that made promises unnecessary, but spelling it out was Yawn City.

It didn't help that every day saw more sense of the ANC as The Movement that would express The People's will. It became smart to talk of the ANC as "the Africans' parliament", spreading the notion that non-ANC views were legitimately ignored or even criminalised.

The strange effect was that while we all knew that power corrupts, South Africa got to learn of pre-power corrupting. As we sensed once-omnipotent Afrikaner nationalism crumbling before about-to-be-omnipotent African Nationalism, equilibrium crumbled too.

I had known a time of believing that everything was so terrible it all had to turn upside down; a mighty force would come to penalise the privileged and uplift the oppressed and forcibly integrate the nation in mind and heart, school and neighbourhood. Now that this was on the cards I didn't want it any longer. I wanted people's power, genuine and true, not the cosy mantra that justified the Movement doing anything it wanted, but the extreme people-power that meant extreme stability; the radical middle.

That was a tad optimistic. The binary view of mankind prevails, the ANC was the embodiment of The People and when *Frontline* demurred we were called fascists. The yells went into the stratosphere when Nomavenda fingered Winnie Mandela's Football Club in 1987.

For some time NomaV had been muttering about Winnie's gang flinging weight. I was unimpressed. For one thing NomaV was deep-died Africanist, PAC/BC, with never a good word for the Charterists, ANC. For another, not long before, I had done a story on Winnie's daughter Zindzi. I'd shown them the draft, and Winnie, soul of sweet reason, had cordially asked me to delete a passage that would set back her peace-making role in the Warara versus Zim-zim wars, a below-radar conflict in which ANC youth and Black Consciousness youth carved each other into slabs of ideologically errant meat. I had obliged, honoured to meet a queen and spellbound by Winnie's charm.

Now my ears were resistant to discordant notes. I told NomaV we should beware disinformation being sown by undercover forces. NomaV said her info was first-hand. I said that Winnie's commitment was to township peace. NomaV said Winnie's gang was the Warara's Panzer Division.

There was a smell of rotting and it grew stronger. My columnist Nthato Motlana told me of "disciplinary proceedings" at Winnie's house. He'd thought: great, community justice emerging. But now he worried it was going awry. Nomavenda knew one of Winnie's neighbours, who told of screams behind the walls.

One Saturday morning I took my 8-year-old to a schoolmate's birthday in Orlando East, Winnie territory. This was new stuff, schoolmates across colour bars, whitey kids socialising in Soweto. Obviously, the child factor would mean a multiplying of the huge welcome that white visitors to townships received anyway. I was braced for a storm of effusion.

No. There was politeness, courtesy, but something was wrong. It turned out The Press was villain. The Press was leaving people in the lurch, to face a reign of terror.

I thought they meant the army. They meant Winnie. I dropped my blocking of Nomavenda's intentions.

NomaV wrote her story on the football club. It also touched on Winnie's new mansion, so far unknown. "The Press" latched on to the mansion and made a giant meal of it, but ducked the football club. The mansion was there to be seen, brick and mortar. The football club ... well, there were pictures of them, too, smiling sweetly in their team uniforms. But "The Press" was not, in public, buying NomaV's testimony that they kicked more than just footballs.

While NomaV also had a flood of thank-you calls, what we both got from the anti-apartheid priesthood was that it was not wise to jeopardise the confidence of The People. We heard that over and again. I'd ask what was untrue; that never mattered. "It is not wise" was what mattered. An old friend, a classical gentle lefty prof, avant garde in everything from his haircut to his bookshelves, shrieked at me till he damaged his throat: I was a fascist and I employed a fascist.

I phoned Winnie, eager to discuss the inadvisability of any accident happening to befall NomaV. A man answered the phone; many voices behind him. He said audibly, to his companions, that the caller was me. The voices fell silent. He put his hand over the mouthpiece and I waited a long time until he came back to say Mrs Mandela was not available. I asked him to try to make her available and there was another long silence. Then the hand was removed. Winnie's voice shouted from the distance, very sibilant: "I - will - not - speak - to - Denis -

Beckett – that – agent – of – the – system”, and the receiver was replaced.

I rang Winnie’s lawyer, Ismail Ayob, to drop a friendly but less than truthful hint that an interesting dossier was in safe hands pending any mishap. Ismail told me to drop the melodrama and that it would all blow over.

Everyone else was telling NomaV she was in danger and she succumbed to the psychosis, preparing to move out. But her neighbours wouldn’t hear of it and put their sons onto 24-hour patrol. Whether or not this would have held the fort, it was a touching gesture and nothing happened anyway.

Winnie was making a public speech at Wits shortly afterwards and one of NomaV’s moles told her we would be mentioned. I went to listen but police invaded the campus and Winnie’s speech was replaced by arrests and tear-smoke. She had written it out, though, and her entourage cheerfully gave me a copy. I had metamorphed, I was intrigued to see, from an agent of the system into an okay guy who had been duped by an agent of the system carefully planted to spread confusion, this being “Mphephu’s Carol Mathiane”.

Winnie’s speech returned to that phrase over and again, Mphephu’s Carol Mathiane.

NomaV was mainly known in Soweto as Carol, which was her first name and the one she had used most of her life, until she decided there were Carols enough and that not for nothing had her late father given her a unique second name.

By ancestry she is solid Zulu. Her father was a missionary in Venda. NomaVenda denotes a girl coming from Venda. That was a bold thing for her parents to hang on her, the Vendas being at that time well down the ethnic status stakes. It was also bold for NomaV, in her 40s, to make it her main name; the ethnic status stakes having not changed as much as we were supposed to think they had.

For instance: a year earlier the *Sowetan* printed an amazingly generous compliment to NomaV’s *Frontline* work – courageous, enterprising, inspirational ... wow, they went big. But it was

spoiled for NomaV by repeated silly knocks at her name.

It was in a way funny and in a way sickening. The *Sowetan* could screech for a week when it nailed a random white guy saying something racist about blacks. But let it come to humble Vendas and the *Sowetan* slipped seamlessly into disparaging metaphor.

Now here was Winnie, the Apostle Paul of Anti-Apartheid, whacking Patrick Mphephu, chief minister of Venda.

Mphephu was an extra-derided figure even by the standards of homeland politicians. He had once used the word “did” where he meant “do” and for ever more the black papers poured sarcastic “dids” over him. A touch harsh, I’d felt. If an English-speaker had done the same it would be bypassed as a slip of the tongue. Yet journalists whose own English was not always beyond improvement made a trivial stumble in a third language an added ground to scorn a collaborator.

Mphephu was widely viewed as not very bright. (Lebowa’s chief minister, Cedric Phatudi, telling me why an alliance plan was held up, leaned over conspiratorially and stage-whispered in his magisterial Oxbridge tones, “Poor dear Patrick; I expect somebody is still trying to read him the constitution.”) But much Mphephu-bashing was Venda-disparaging in disguise. If Nomavenda had been Nomaxhosa I wouldn’t see Winnie making a great play on “Matanzima’s Carol Mathiane”.

Ismail Ayob was right and the fuss blew over as fusses do. Six months later NomaV re-ignited it, and a year later again, with refresher courses on the blood-spilling hobbies of Winnie’s boys. But to the broad public Received Wisdom remained that the football club was a church-style youth group, until the death of a boy named Stompie Sepei.

Stompie became famous in death, and NomaV was vindicated. Soweto’s *cosa nostra* even disowned Winnie for a while until they needed her name and personality again.

Winnie was charged, for kidnap. Kidnap? The child was dead. There were mutterings that if this was anyone else the charge would be murder. A year or two later, my neighbour on

a plane was the Attorney General, Klaus von Lieres und Wilkau (he has four forenames, too). He outlined his scenario of what might have happened were Winnie convicted of murder at that powderkeg time – when, at that, the death sentence not only existed but was in some circumstances mandatory. I dropped any idea that Klaus ought to have proceeded by law alone. He would have caused thousands of deaths. Even on the lesser charge, public reaction to Winnie’s trial tested the edges of chaos.

The ANC was the government in waiting, all right, but it was a funny kind of waiting, with the anti-apartheid supporters’ club singing hallelujahs from the rooftops and mumbling omigods when the microphones were off.

To the liberal world the ANC was trigger-happy – didn’t they see that good decent parliamentary opposition was working on the problem? In NomaV’s world it was overweening – yes of course there had to be shooting and bombing of whites and collaborators, but not of anyone else. To me it would be a magnificently welcome Party, if it was a Party among Parties, vying, contending, answering to little people. But we seemed headed for a new version of what the Nats had been for their first thirty years: the fount of holy authority in the sacred name of The Majority.

Frontline saw a small harbinger in 1988. We received a 12-edition, double-page, full-colour, advertisement booking, for Shell. Was this perfect or was this perfect? It was perfect. Except that after one appearance the booking was cancelled. Damn, had someone from the government got at them? No, a director had remembered a *Frontline* article entitled “The All-Important ANC and Other Myths”, and did not want the new government coming round with a little black book.

His view was his own but it reflected what people expected. While I merrily wrote of a democracy where people voted group cohesion sometimes, drains sometimes, moral guidance sometimes, etc, I was on an island. Most people saw voting herds, expressing identity like a census, delivering a mega-ANC

whose office-bearers scurried to keep in the president's favour.

The *Sowetan* held a seminar to open their new offices. Formal talk was ills of oppression as normal, and roll on the ANC as was newly sayable. Informal talk was gloom about the ANC's "white communists misleading our children". I asked why not say in public what you say in private? I got puzzled stares. A school friend of NomaV's asked us to expose the Catholic church. The who? Yep, the Catholics were no longer servants of the Lord, they were agents of the ANC. A prominent ANC-front spokesman said, "If we ever get the power we want, emigrate."

It was a trap. The ANC embodied freedom; to doubt the ANC was to doubt freedom. Even Nomavenda was caught up. Nobody could call her timid, but she was in a double bind. She had no confidence in ANC rule, but, as she powerfully wrote, in the absence of liberation she couldn't indulge the luxury of wondering what sort of liberation she would end up with.

I had my own quiet regret. How easy it would be if the concept of ultra-democ was on the table. We'd walk right in with minimal resistance and no terror. This was the perfect time; a powerful government keen to tame power before it handed power over, a claimant strong enough to veto an unjust taming. No such time was likely to come again.

15

Parroting Karl

THE PLAYWRIGHT SAMUEL BECKETT WAS MY FATHER'S COUSIN, making him either my second cousin or my first cousin once removed. I could never work out the difference and have not greatly bothered, since he was forty years older than me and slotted in my mind in the mode of uncle. The first time I met him I had worked out a batch of pseudo-intelligent adolescent observations regarding *Waiting for Godot*, which was his greatest success and also about the last of his books I could begin to understand. We were walking through Paris to his regular restaurant an awesome distance from his flat – he was a fierce walker until his back gave in – and passed an imposing building. “That is the Men of Letters Society”, he said. I thought he said “Men of Lesser Society” and was surprised by such coyness. “Oh”, I said, “you mean a kind of asylum?” I had already given him cause to wonder what kind of simpletons were bred in South Africa, and at this he knew for sure. To recover ground I took the next opportunity to sneak in the

foremost of my well-rehearsed profundities(?) about Godot. I was half-way through the sentence when he said: “Oh dear, I hope you’re not going to talk about Godot. A person moves on, you know. Godot is gone.” So much for my careful preparation, but I got to know what he meant.

My first book, *Permanent Peace*, wasn’t a Godot, but it was the best that I could do in 1985. After *Fallacy*, three years later, my heart sank on the infrequent occasions when somebody phoned or wrote with queries arising from *Permanent Peace*. It had come to seem uncooked, unpolished. That was in 1985. In 1990 I wrote, “My heart sinks on the infrequent occasions when somebody phones to say he’s been reading *Permanent Peace* and to raise queries arising from it. It seems so rudimentary now.”

It was a financial disaster, too. I printed 1,000 copies, which sold out in short order. Then I printed 500 more, making the total outlay twice as much as it would have been if I’d done the whole 1,500 in one go. These sold out, too, and so, twice bitten and once shy, I did a third print of 2,500, of which 2,200 ended as pulp.

The logic was that since no-one was taking up an argument which appeared in dribs and drabs in a magazine, do a book and get it reviewed. It half worked. *Permanent Peace*’s first review was in *Finance Week*, by Geoff Shuttleworth, who later went to Australia. It qualified as a rave even though the printed version was less of a rave than the original. I bumped into the editor, Allan Greenblo, the day before it appeared. “Boy!” he said, “are we giving you a punt tomorrow! Shuttleworth went bananas, I had to tone him down.” I threw him a mock punch and said I’d bet nobody was toning the bad reviews up. If I’d known then what I was soon to learn, it would have been a real punch.

Harvey Tyson in *The Star* and Aggrey Klaaste in the *Sowetan* followed up with what were perhaps semi-raves, or at least demi-semi-raves, in their own ways. I thought the ball was getting rolling at last, but that was as far as it rolled. Next was a historian from UCT, Colin Bundy, in the *Weekly Mail*, saying in effect: here’s a good laugh.

Then came Robert Kirby in the *Financial Mail*.

I was in Stellenbosch trying to persuade Oudemeester's marketing execs that *Frontline* was a good place for them to advertise. As usual I wasn't shaping quite according to plan – one of them said among other things that advertisers preferred a fat glossy publication to a slim modest one. When I left them I went to the Stellenbosch CNA to check whether *Frontline* was on display and in the right place – half the time you'd find it with the gun magazines, if at all. There was a new *Financial Mail* and I ran down the index. Begob, a review of Permanent Peace. I turned it up and found a headline, "Very Sincere", which should have rung alarms. So should the byline. Robert Kirby is a satirist whose forte is ripping things up. It was enemy action for the FM to give him the book, and for a while I was quite paranoid about that but in hindsight I accepted it as reflecting the general ridicule of the "solutions" genre.

Kirby outdid himself. I started reading with an open-ended curiosity and only slowly realised that here was a classic pillorying under way, with me in the stocks. I imagined that even as I was standing stupefied at the CNA magazine rack, the Oudemeester execs I had just left were opening their post and reading their FMs and thinking "and we nearly took this guy seriously!" Worse, their counterparts at Southern Life in Cape Town, who I was meant to be seeing on the same mission two hours later, were doubtless chortling over their luncheon sandwiches. I chickened out. The pay-phones at the post office were miraculously in working order. I cancelled on the pretext of health, which wasn't as much of a lie as it would have been a few moments earlier, and crossed the road to the beautifully renovated Coetzenburg Hotel with every intention of drinking myself into the first genuine stupor I had known since student days. Biology and economics conspired to foil me, what with the stomach no longer able to cope with more beer than the head and the bartender baulking when the pocket arrived at its customary state. Some time later a friend of mine went to the FM's library in search of examples of brutal book reviews

and was given Kirby on Permanent Peace, so I suppose Kirby's effort did have its redeeming value but this was hard to see at the time.

After that the reviews were plenty but piffling. In the Port Elizabeth *Evening Post*, the extreme case, Permanent Peace rated two incomprehensible inches sandwiched between a romance and a gardening manual. The *Post* dutifully sent me a tearsheet of the books page, and I had no need of the rest of the paper – front page, leader page, etc – to know what it was mainly about. In late '85 every front page and every leader page in South Africa were mainly about one single question: Where do we go now? That was what I was trying to address, flanked by a heroine named Antoinette and a lesson on soil texture. About this time I first dreamed of a crowd of people running around in anxiety while I was pointing for all I was worth and yelling, “that way, that way”, inaudible and invisible. At first there was a fright in the dream when some frantic running character was about to collide into me but they would always run right through, like that childhood falling dream where you relax in the knowledge you're just going to fall forever and never hit the bottom. I didn't need an analyst to interpret, but I was sure getting tired of the drawing board.

The title of Permanent Peace didn't help. Here, it seemed, was utopia again. I stick to it, despite much opportunity to recant. If your political process depends wholly and firmly on the ratification of voters, permanent peace is what you get. I don't say permanent harmony, or even any harmony, but peace. People can have their rows, major and drastic, about everything under the sun, but their rows are within a constitutional framework and not about the framework {Peace Point 1}, and whoever turns to triggers gets voted out of office {Peace Point 2}. I concede, though, that the words were less than optimum marketing wise.

After PP's demise, intensive democracy lived on in some slightly reluctant articles in *Frontline*. I had to write them though I knew deep down that readers were thinking “we can

skip this bit". I could never forget that, very literally, because Tony Sutton never ever missed an opportunity to say so. Tony designed *Frontline* because he loved it. It was far from his most lucrative contract, but to him it was "incisive" and "important" and "good sense". Traditionally, whether your paper says Hang the Rich or Nuke the Poor is immaterial to your design man, who only cares that the visuals are good. Not Tony. His thing was making right words look good. In his eyes, no words were righter than *Frontline*'s words, until I hit the democracy binge, which he saw as sabotage. Month after month he designed this thing of beauty that was going to be bugged-up by my aberration. He got ratty, and no matter how manifold his other sins nobody ever called Tony devious. He spoke up.

It was a relief to him when I took Democracy out of *Frontline* to put it in Book Two, same logic as Book One and same phenomenon of the damaging headline. The Fallacy of Heroes; who needs to read a book whose title lays it bare? Hermann Giliomee summed that up, "I haven't read it but I know what it's about; you're against heroes".

Ja/nee. The title of Fallacy came from a Brecht quote. One character says, "Pity the nation that has no heroes" and another replies, "No, pity the nation that needs heroes". Hermann was partway right. I want to belong to a nation that doesn't need heroes. What I like about Brecht is that his No 2 figure doesn't say, "pity the nation that has heroes". He says, "Pity the nation that needs heroes". As I see it there's a sizable difference, and neither the having nor the needing has any particular bearing upon the notion of leaders. I certainly expect leaders to lead, and I have no particular problem with the idea of heroes emerging. My hang-up is with the syndrome of relying on some mystical figure to pitch up and make everything right.

Where Permanent Peace had been a rush job, Fallacy took long in the writing, with the main effect that *Frontline*'s ailments veered from the chronic towards the terminal. In June of '88 I gave the draft to a few people for comments. Aggrey Klaaste wanted to serialise the entire book in the *Sowetan*.

Bobby Godsell at Anglo American came back glowingly about the “impact this book will undoubtedly have”. Ton Vosloo at Nasionale Pers glowed at higher wattage. “You cut through the hogwash and drivel with the sharpest blade I have ever seen in action, stripping away all preconceptions which anybody and everybody, including yours truly, has ever had... Ek kan amper sê ek voel so sterk soos Paulus wie se oë oopgegaan het.” [I can almost say I feel as strong as Paul whose eyes were opened.]

I asked Murray Coombes at Penguin to run it past his editorial eye. He gave it to John Allen, Penguin’s MD, who offered to publish it. Ton Vosloo had passed it on to Danie van Niekerk, MD of Tafelberg, who did the same. Danie wanted do a run of 3,000, by February. February seemed an eternity away and I had no desire to sit on the thing for another eight months while the subject matter moved. Also Danie wanted me to cut it down by a quarter, and at the time I thought I’d already cut it to the bone. John Allen talked of more – 8 000 – and sooner – “by about October”. The “about” bothered me, plus that John was strong on that I’d have to go on author’s tours and interviews, which made me shudder. Doug Band at the CNA agreed to buy 1,000 outright, which assured me of something to pay the printers with, so I did it myself, thereby scoring yet another notch on a crowded fuselage of errors.

We had a “function” in August to launch the book – the first “function” in *Frontline*’s history. It was a breakfast at the Blue Room in the Johannesburg Station. I liked the symbolism – the old world battling to come to terms with the new. I also liked the prices; this venue was far from fashionable. There were about 30 people – editors and commentators. I earnestly appealed to them to engage the debate rather than praise the book. Almost to a man, they thereupon went off to praise the book and ignore the debate. In most cases they praised the book to the skies, along with my good intentions and sincerity etc, and wound up by saying in effect, “but forget it, because it’s totally unrealistic”.

There were exceptions both ways. Clem Sunter took most

of a *Sunday Times* leader page to say that the book would change the world. A guy in *New Nation* – an unfamiliar black byline which I suspected was a pseudonym for one of the white lefties who write much of the paper – said that it was unmitigated rubbish which denied the People’s Movement the rights which everybody else would acquire by democracy. This was an intriguing perspective, and I could only put it down to the assumption that since democracy would be marked by the People’s Movement taking control, to want the People’s Movement to submit to the ratification of the masses was undemocratic.

If I’d had a brain in my head I would have taken John Allen’s offer and smiled through the author interviews. But on the strength of early responses I cheerfully believed that the argument was finally about to take hold. Hm. At one stage I’d been in the odd position of holding Aggrey back. I was saying that serialising the whole book in a daily newspaper might be excessive, and he was saying he knew better. A month later Aggrey had gone on an anti-politics drive under the name “Nation Building” and didn’t want to sully this with anything that smelled of political causes. Anyhow, he said, there must be something wrong or why weren’t other papers serialising, debating, pounding? Everywhere else was much the same – the argument couldn’t be real because someone else didn’t swallow it. Whites said blacks wouldn’t swallow it, blacks said whites wouldn’t swallow it, English said Afrikaners wouldn’t swallow it, verligtes said verkramptes wouldn’t swallow it. Permanent circuit.

The long and the short is that Fallacy, too, dropped an imperceptible ripple in the pond and sank to oblivion. By now the famous drawing board was becoming an albatross. Uh, oh, was I condemned to write another bloody book, saying the same thing a third time?

Obviously I’d committed some sin. I couldn’t see what. I looked up Karl Marx for inspiration (methodology, not ideology). Light dawned. I had made things too simple.

Karl stuffed up half the world for most of a century. How? By being opaque and learned. You had to read a sentence five times so you took it seriously. Way to go.

So I re-started. I got opaque and learned, bringing in history and psychology and sociology and long words like in real textbooks. Fallacy had been criticised for failing to identify an academic pedigree. This failure was not accidental, there being no pedigree whether academic or other, but for Book Three the plan was that if people want a pedigree, a pedigree they shall have. I'd still say what I wanted but I'd back it up with "ibids" and "op cites" and classy names from Hannah Arendt to Emile Zola. There'd be no asides, no anecdotes, no frivolous bits; solid theory, grave and earnest. Karl had constructed a palatial theory on a dud foundation. I had the right foundation so I needed but a bungalow theory. It just had to sound theoretical.

Also, I had to dose up the guarantee against tyranny. To the Nats – and Progs, Black Consciousniks, Inkathas, PAC s, everyone outside the juggernaut called ANC – my reasoning fell flat against one single line: *but-they'll-tear-up-the-constitution*. I'd thought I'd allayed that – right from '84, in fact; that had been kick-off point. If power counted at every tier, the social fabric was thickly stitched. If power-wielders in every tier answered to their voters, the constitution was untearable – not optionally untearable, or difficult to tear; granite untearable.

Strictly, the constitution itself would not be very important. Its written checks and balances would be overtaken by the organic check-and-balance of thousands of majority wills. The interaction of wills would be the guarantor of constitutionalism. One day, that would be as self-evident as belt-buckles or automatic kettles. Schoolchildren would laugh on learning that once upon a time order had depended on clauses composed by bygone dignitaries. A clause to protect minority rights would as inconceivable as a clause to protect the law of gravity. One day, natural process would do the job. "Minority rights" would cease to be an endangered species; it would become an archaic term. But "one day" was not here yet. People had to see Clause LXV (7)

(bis) (iii) stipulating loud and clear that The Big Black Charterist ANC Government Shalt Not Bully You Little Guys. They had to see it, in order to say: “of course, they’ll just tear it up.”

Perhaps that was understandable, in a society accustomed to a single gang calling all the shots. But, yoosh, people insisted on keeping their eyes closed. Especially the single gang that called the shots.

Afrikaner Nationalism was overwhelmingly the strongest entity in the country. You could talk change until you went blue, but unless the Nats signed up it was empty talk. The target was for the Nats to say, “universal franchise is coming; instead of waiting for a simplistic franchise to knock us over let’s create an excellent franchise, true rule of the people.” They would shuck off the paralysis that had overcome them, and the cynicism and the grab-and-run, and pursue democracy hell-for-leather. The Boere were good pursuers, once they saw a way to go. No-one doubted that. Look how hard they’d pursued their last Survival idea, and that had been a wrong one. The right one, aside from meaning permanence, released right instincts. Last time they’d built their “survival” on exclusion – “away, you blacks, other side of the fence!” – which of course overlapped into hate and scorn and horrible stuff. This one would be built on appeal -- “please, dear new compatriots, consider the prospect of having us, too, accountable to your free vote for the conduct of drains/water/power/policing/other in the different tiers.”

The task was to let the Nats see themselves staying in the game. Once they’d finished blinking their disbelief, we’d be into rich democracy. The ANC might squawk, but whilst it could doubtless forever denounce semi-freedom, it would not long get away with denouncing too much freedom. We’d acquire a palette of politicians answering to a pyramid of constituencies, and from there we were on the tarmac. No coups: too many majorities. No chaos: majorities vote for order. No lunacies: majorities have no humour.

In my mind, concepts were clarifying. But they were not flowing into this Book 3, which was Book 2 in bigger words;

Fallacy in the language of Das Kapital. I paused for cold assessment, and cold was the word. Would my words sucker any real political scientist? No. Would I read it if it landed – cold – on my desk? No. Why was I delving in the furrows of pseudo-academe? No idea. Book 3 dwindled to inglorious neglect.

I thought I heard the bloody drawing-board call my name. I blocked my ears.

16

Power To, Um, Who?

IN 1971 I HAD WORKED AT A CONSTRUCTION SITE AT KAFUE IN Zambia. With a total lack of relevant qualifications I expected to wield a pick and shovel. But literacy was in short supply and I was appointed dogsbody to the site agent. One day, amid howling sirens, an entourage of Landrovers drew up at the agent's office, bearing the Provincial Governor. He produced a document with some 15 names. These employees, said the Governor, were traitors; they were to be fired.

The agent expostulated. These were good and loyal workers; he couldn't just sack them. The Governor, high on the pomposity of power, coldly declared: "They are unpatriotic persons, members of the opposition. You must dismiss them now while I am here."

The agent did it. I collaborated, working out severance pay. The Governor stood over us like a Gestapo Oberst in blackface.

Here was a rabbit-punch. Majority rule was supposed to be a forward move from wicked white oppression. A funny idea of

forward. I tried to rationalise it; tsk, poor Zambia, in the birth-pangs of independence the characteristics of confidence could not yet be expected. Thus became I an accomplice in Zambia's slide. When you start making excuses, where do you stop?

I stayed for a time on Independence Avenue, between State House and the Secretariat. Morning, evening, and twice at lunch, His Excellency, The President, occupied the road, and there were police and sirens and motorbikes and immobile civilians ten minutes before and five aft.

It was exciting, the first time. Wow! The Prez! With flags and pomp and power! By the third time the motorcade chowing the middle of the road loses its thrill. The blaze of glory curdles to vainglory. I'd look at lorry-drivers and deliverymen around me, engines switched off, catching a snooze. It was hard to rise to Kaunda's frequent exhortations to greater productivity.

I thought the pomp and the bullying may be "African character". Later I revised that. These things are effects of a bad political base. Whatever "African character" there may or may not be, if big-shots answer fully enough to little people they don't think of telling employers who to sack

After Zambia, I took a stint as a barman in Devon, England. I had an aged truck that supplemented my income by lugging cargoes to London from time to time. On one trip, fuming in a London traffic jam, I looked at the car next to me, a quiet green Rover. The Prime Minister, Edward Heath, was in the back seat, reading documents and glancing at his watch, as irritated as I was. I decided then and there that I preferred a society where the head of government gets stuck in traffic jams to a society where he causes them. Not least, a Prime Minister who gets stuck in traffic jams is not likely to be a Prime Minister who locks up the opposition.

But I belonged in Johannesburg. Who was I to want anything? I was only white. What did my view matter, in Africa? The European way might be fine for Europe but if Africa's way was vainglory and the Governor's blacklist, mustn't I bow to that?

The word "liberal" was big and clear in those days. A liberal,

in South Africa, was a white person who (1) sought equal rights for everyone and (2) was not communist.

Obviously, the liberals had no representative in parliament. Even the Progs, semi-liberals whose policy was a disastrous thing called “qualified franchise” for black people, only managed a single MP, Helen Suzman. Liberals were very undangerous, but became quite a swearword nonetheless, being presumed to give bad ideas to the blacks.

I didn’t quite know I was a liberal, to start with. The general instinct fitted fine – let people be – but there was a lot of cluttering. We were presumed to be apologetic about ourselves and our whiteness. There was some idea that to be liberal you had to be “on the side of the blacks”, and/or “identify with the majority”; we must find out what “blacks” want and say “we want that too” and if by cosmic error some blacks wanted X and other blacks wanted Y, we had to know which ones to uphold as authentic. Well, the whole country operated on broken compasses, why shouldn’t we?

In time I grew to better understandings – stand for what you believe; human respect is not about categories; wrong thinkers also have rights – but time takes time to wear in.

Liberals were the pioneers. Eventually I ceased to feel unAfricanly guilty about preferring Heath in his jam to Kaunda in his motorcade, but as we moved on we passed the guilt bug to our contemporaries. The toughies who had chanted supremacy while we thrilled to illegal multi-racial drinking and – aah, the upmanship! – illegal wrongly-racial lovers were now telling us that this was black man’s country and our job was to walk behind.

Crazy nation, all right, but it does mean growth, notably into recognising the person and not the race-group. It ain’t always easy. By the Xth time that three-quarters of the black guests haven’t pitched up you cease to blame the one-quarter who have, but you think twice before you try again.

Also, I found, you develop a lot of sympathy for the Questing Afrikaner.

By the late '80s, *Frontline's* office was a port of call for a stream of Questing Afrikaners, people who wanted to break out of the tribe, or anyway out of the tribe's mental prison, and didn't know how. I'd do my best but it was never much good. They needed a movement; pamphlets to distribute or cakes to bake, a flag to rally under. I gave them a totally unknown theory of a better democracy. I wished I had something else to give.

At a Free the Children rally at Central Methodist, I was on the podium. Free the Children was one of the ANC fronts that mushroomed from '83. Perhaps they weren't quite "fronts", but diagonals: they were all in tune with the cause, but were not all taking instructions. I was a guest, my reward for having written something compatible. In the audience was a sore-thumb character in a green suit. Green suit meant Boer for a start, and this guy had Boer written all over anyway. He could have been Special Branch, but my gut said Questing Afrikaner.

Parents came on to talk poignantly about their children and jail; black parents, naturally. It was very moving. I watched Green-suit. He was rapt. After the parents came the usual blame-the-Boere analysis, from English whites anxious to say "not us". Green-suit wriggled.

Then the white lady chairman said: "We shall now sing the national anthem". Green-suit sprang to his feet. The strains of Nkosi Sikelele Afrika started up. Green-suit looked as if he'd been hit with a cosh. After a while he slipped out (fortifying my feeling that he was a Quester and not a cop).

As I imagined it, here was someone struggling with soul and conscience, willing to move if he saw somewhere to move to. He'd never heard any whisper of any national anthem but Die Stem. Hearing this strange song in a strange language, the message he gets is, "So long, boeta, the new world is come and you are out of it." I imagined him thinking them-or-us and jumping into the "us", spurned in his candidature for the side of the angels.

I was upset on his account and upset on mine; there was now an enemy where there could have been a friend. I wrote a

piece which I can now see was less mannerly than it should be, and in *Frontline's* small universe the fertiliser hit the fan.

I plunged to sarcasm about whites who claimed Nkosi Sikelele as their anthem but hadn't learned the words, so they stood with mouths opening and closing like goldfish. I also wondered who was the "Ngawethu" in "Amandla Ngawethu". The phrase means "Power to Us" and I argued that it would be helpful if there was some reasonable understanding as to who the "us" was. Did "us" include everybody, the capitalists and the racists and the Black Consciousniks and the dreaded Gatsha and the lot, all putting their hats in the democratic ring and letting an outcome flow from the aggregate of interactions? If it did, then I'd have no trouble with "Power to Us"; it'd be just the ticket. But plenty of people interpreted "Power to Us" as the ANC telling everyone what colour boots to wear, and plenty of others had the NomaV-ish idea of "Ngawethu" as a switch of jackboot to the black man's foot, usually with earnest promises of benignity. For me there was too much "the" in the equation. Was I "the whites"? Was my once-a-month gardener Johannes, "the blacks"? Was my embracing of his citizenship supposed to mean I abandoned my own? Didn't work.

To call the Amandla slogan into question was sacrilege. To challenge Nkosi Sikelele was worse, although to anyone who could see straight I had not disrespected the anthem but only a segment of its singers. (My kids grew up, very satisfactorily, with both; two anthems with not a word of English; a bigness to rejoice in.)

These things were combative, I accept, but the part that got the most blood boiling was about the raised-fist salute.

While I have no trouble with a white person supporting black liberation, like a male person supporting feminism, I don't know about this salute, which had started as a Black Power thing and although it has diffused a bit still rings of "this is our thing." Arms as pale as mine poking the air in a sign of black pride seemed almost a theft, really, of what wasn't theirs.

I raised this thought and also, slightly throwaway, touched

on the fists getting heavier as verses got longer, so that the second part of the anthem offered the terrific vista of people's eyes crossing in anxiety to work out how to drop your aching arm unnoticed.

This article was a turning point. Previously I had been easily wounded by attacks, but now I got so much that I had to thicken my skin to armourplate specs. The Free the Children episode helped me to one of the few positions that I am unequivocal about, which is not caring what people say about me. (Unequivocal in principle, you understand.) Rob Greig, poet and arts ed, once gave me a poster of Aristotle's "Care more for the truth than what people think." Funny grammar, but fine point. Rob gave it to me not because he was knocked out by the sentiment but because he was throwing away a collection of homilies ("pompous crap"). Aristotle stayed on my wall for years, together with Rochefoucauld's "Few men are wise enough to prefer honest criticism to treacherous praise". Pompous or not, Aristotle was a solace, one I needed.

My aim was never to cause offence. It was to inject thought even at the risk of causing offence. For every three people who bollocksed that article for heresy there was one who said, "That's right, we liberals have got to do better" and for a heady moment I thought this seed might grow into the muscular liberalism I wanted to see, but no, the moment faded. I got so used to disappointments that they ceased to be disappointing.

Another guest at the Free the Children gig was Tony Bloom, the fifth, or thereabouts, main plutocrat in the country and reputedly the most socially-awake company boss. He invited me to a chairman's-suite lunch soon after and expressed some interest – more than most of his guests – in the maximising of democracy.

I reciprocated his lunch, of course. I would have reciprocated anyway but I also had a sharp dose of the usual ulterior motive: proselytise Tony. For venue, I chose the perfect place ...

In 1898, the repository of Johannesburg's wealth and grace and elegance was Doornfontein. There, a Mr Wachenheimer

set up a delicatessen in Beit Street, which was Rue Rivoli and Heerengracht and Park Avenue rolled into one.

By 1988, Doornfontein was the back side of town. The common term would be arse end, but I'm being polite. Beit Street was brothels; rooms by the hour. To the gentry and the high society, Doornfontein was as far as Timbuktu. And here had I recently been introduced, by one Patrick McLaughlin, PR guy and fellow sufferer from infatuation with thirsty impractical ancient Jaguars, unto Wachenheimer's delicatessen.

This was startling. I thought I knew my city as well as anyone short of a taxi driver. I'd never heard of this jewel, which had been here for twice my lifetime. Well, now I had. Where better to take the most dashing of corporate chairmen? He knew the smart places, all right, doubtless too well. He'd get quite some frisson, roughing it in Beit Street. I sent a map with the venue, imagining him and a sharp executive secretary going wide-eyed.

On the morning I wondered: did Wachenheimers do wine? I rang and the voice on the phone was unhesitant: no, wine was not served. No problem; I went out to purchase a chilled Grand Cru with an ice wrapper. Mr Organiser, hey? A fleeting thought flitted: they wouldn't be anti-liquor, would they; religious or something? Indeed, there'd been Hebrew stuff all around, the day with Patrick. But no, we'd had beer. I recalled it clearly.

I'm first and I bring in my Grand Cru. A young Wachenheimer politely says very sorry but no wine here please. I say, but, but, but, we drank beer...

Wachenheimer Jr is explaining why beer can be kosher but wine cannot when Tony arrives and the place erupts.

I'd forgotten that Tony is Jewish. Why did I do that? For a terrific reason; I'd stopped noticing. Once, everyone who failed to be born Anglo-Saxon was a Something; a Jew, a Coloured, a Afrikaner... By 1988, here was proof, I didn't notice Jews. One day I won't notice Anybodies.

Not only was Tony Jewish but his dad, Joe, the legendary founder of Premier Milling, had been at school with half the

Wachenheimers. Tony had known the place forever but had not called in for quite some time. Now here in person was the shtetl boy made GOOD. It was an event. It was major. The inappropriate image that ran through my head while I waited through the greetings was of Second Coming.

Over our plates of beef-bratwurst and lard-mash with the house's special magic onion gravy, we snatched conversation between serried ranks of Wachenheimers coming to tell Tony what he needed to do to protect their investment. By the time I had Tony's undiluted ear and might twist his arm to create a new mode of South African thinking, our plates were empty. To prolong matters I asked for coffee and added a classy rider, very avant garde at that time: "with hot milk, please".

Every Wachenheimer from age 10 to 92 promptly cracked up. Tony felt obliged to humour them and I felt sore. I wasn't asking for pig's milk, for Chrissake! What was wrong with milk? Even low-fat would be fine.

No sooner had the Yiddisches overcome their mirth at this Goyische wanting milk than a Wachenheimer came to ask Tony to move his Ferrari, as gawkers were jamming the street.

Today, another powerful voice was about to not-join the cause.

Mind, even if I'd had Tony's ear in pure captivity, not-joining was ordained. He had just been on a delegation to State President PW Botha, and was bleak: Botha was beyond hope, the government was beyond hope, the Afrikaners were beyond hope, liberalism was a spent force, the idea of generating a new liberalism was a ridiculous daydream, the country was stuffed.

And let alone that our chaotic lunch had not lent itself to an ideal sales presentation, Tony revolted against what he did hear.

Of the many knights I had sought to enlist, not many survived the first but-Pietersburg-can-choose-to-drive-on-the-right stage. Most of those then fell at the but-the-poor-will-vote-to-take-all-we-have stage. Tony slid through both of those seamlessly, only to jam rock-solid at but-you-let-racists-be-racists.

I may have failed to respond with tact and diplomacy. From

some quarters I could handle the racism-is-the-evil thing, though any quarter would do well to distinguish the racism that is insult and belittlement from the racism that says “Excuse me may my children go to school with others of their language and customs?” But my fuse splutters when the rich extol the holy principle that everyone must live non-racial lives.

Late 80s, bear in mind, the universal expectation was a long and awful attrition, unknowable decades of tanks in the suburbs and exploding letterboxes while government says “You can drink white man’s liquor now, be grateful” and the revolution says “We want one man one vote”, government says “You’re getting a black chamber in parliament and you can pee in the white man’s loo, be grateful” and the revolution says “We want one man one vote”. (Nobody yet saying “person”).

In this context, smoke came out of my ears when fat cats invoked the Gospel of Racelessness. It was fun for a black doctor or diplomat to move into Leafy Street, his child into Saint Highfees College. It was less fun on the busdriver side of town, seeing yourself as odd man out on your home turf, your child twice alien in a school whose formal language is English and playground one is Sotho.

We were going through hell because Economy-class whites feared swamping. First-class didn’t help by urging “yes, no escape down there!” Abolishing racism was the right alternative to the toning-down of imposed racist laws, but it also smacked of righteous-speak for “push racism underground so we can’t be blamed”. And in a real democracy ... if the people in full free choice set the terms on which I may run a school for left-handed people with brown eyes, who should say them nay?

Not long after Wachenheimer Day, Tony voted with his air-ticket. His peers in the plutocracy had the habit of issuing ferocious SA-is-home statements while their families took ever longer trips abroad until the trips amounted to 50 weeks, leaving sacred space for Christmas at Plettenberg Bay. Tony didn’t do that. He did it open and upfront: He said: I’m leaving, this place doesn’t work for me. I respected that.

17

Reprieves

IN THE FIRST HALF OF “CATCH 22”, JOSEPH HELLER HAS A character named Clevinger, an idealist full of goodwill towards mankind. But then Heller suffers the shrapnel to fall upon the just as well as the unjust, and the next chapter opens with the words: “Clevinger was dead. That was the flaw in his philosophy.” For me, Clevinger lived. There a beautiful intrigue in Heller’s paradox, and a fellow-feeling. I spent my life rounding up money. That was the flaw in my philosophy. Money issues piled on my head until my mind was cross-eyed. Twice a month, four times, twenty, I’d think time for a real job; pay, pension, non-bouncing cheques ... But something always came up, something I had to publish.

Early on a knock on the door heralded a young shy guy who said he was the Roodepoort correspondent of *The Star*. With Jo’burg arrogance my eyes glazed over. What could a Roodepoort correspondent write that I would want to publish? He said he’d gone to meet the leader of one of the neo-fascist

parties that were cropping up all over. He held out a short neat piece of typing. Every paragraph made me laugh a few laughs and think at least one new thought. I asked his name. He said “Gus Silber”.

Gus went on to become the most sought-after freelancer in the game, but to me, not alone, his *Frontline* articles were his Top Division. Everywhere, he was funny. In *Frontline* he was funny and thought-provoking.

Likewise Terry Baron. Big rough tough Terry, “Grizzly” in his own third-person, was a sportswriter, constantly in three wars with his editors, over stylebook; match report; editors.

In Terry’s view . . .

- the stylebook was handcuffs. Writing was supposed to explore, to break bounds, to develop
- the match report was half the story; the other half saw the quizzical hobo in the parking lot, the groundsmen battling to dry the field, how the star speaks to the waiter.
- the editors’ job was to suggest changes the writer might consider making; not to alter copy so that what is printed shocks the person under whose name it appears.

When Terry handed in his copy it was exactly, down to the last comma, what he intended it to be. Innocent laypersons may assume that this is natural in the world of professional writing. Innocent laypersons are sadly wrong. Many big-name writers are capable of handing in sloppy half-baked uncorrected drivel in confidence that the editing process will save their sorry bacon. Some big-name writers take pride in being sloppy. It proves rank. The great man’s job is to think profound thoughts, a humble mechanic at the sub-editors’ table can render them into English. Not Terry. His work was his work, and changes must be by agreement.

Terry’s fist had famously left the editor of *The Star* flat on his pile carpet after a discussion of these matters. He lost his job, no surprise, but turned up at the *Sunday Times*, where he felt in better tune though far from ideal. We met at a Sunday lunch. He raved about *Frontline* and I raved about his piece in

that day's paper. He said it would have been a better piece but they'd made him take bits out for being irrelevant and long. I said that irrelevant worked for me and so did long, if the writing was right.

Terry unilaterally, asking no permission that was bound to be refused, started moonlighting for *Frontline*, and gave us his best stuff. It was not only I who said that, so did the sports journalism awards. Terry's sports column in the nation's least-sports journal became an institution to our egg-head readers and an institution to the sports world's judges. Never was I prouder than when I in my penguin suit took the stage at the premier sportswriter function (Terry was not always keen to attend these things), to receive his award on his behalf and brandish it to cheers and laughter from sportspersons who knew that I knew no more sport than they knew constitutional theory. (Poltergeists made me ham up my ignorance, too, such as by asking, while they dissect a great rugby moment, "is this in cricket or is it in soccer?")

Terry was a high point in the *Frontline* firmament. I made sure there was a large desk between us when I had editorial quibbles, but peace ruled. I rated writer's rights as highly as he did. It's a deep sorrow to me that he has vanished – literally, no-one I know knows where he may be. I do not have the feeling that it is a happy vanishing, and I do have the feeling that I caused him disappointment. He asked me to help him get a book published. I tried – didn't I try! – and I got a large amount of "it's brilliant, but not viable in the SA market". I think Terry thought I could pull rabbits out of hats, and I let him down. Which he never did to me. Several times that I doubted I could afford another edition, Terry arrived with copy that had to be published.

Thapelo Masilela, too, with inside tales of feuds and witches in the villages of the north. Thapelo, with Benson Ntlemo, and Gibson Mvubelo, Nape a'Motana, Nana Kutumela and others, lifted lids on the nation around us. This was *Frontline's* mission; my self-imposed mandate, what I wanted. But aaaarrghh!, it was costly.

Frontline was to be for everyone; active-minded people from all walks of life, interested in the truths of their place and their time. And true, that sort-of happened. We were a blurring of the divisions in which we lived. But a truth of our place in our time (maybe all places at all times) is that interest-horizons are short. Few people go for mind-stretch reading at all, and most of those want their standpoint reflected. Our readers were mainly white, English-speaking, liberal-ish. They wanted some exposure to non-white, non-English, non-liberals, or why were they with us? But not too much.

Logically, a Thapelo shedding light on witches was as broadening as a NomaV shedding light on police raids, or more broadening. Plenty of people wrote up raids (though seldom like NomaV) while few people wrote up witches.

But readers loved NomaV. Many times was I told: “I feel I’m reading my sister”. They loved Nthato Motlana, as weighty a “black leader” as bared his soul in print. They could connect to the Tshokolo Molakengs and Gomolemo Mokaes and Sandile Memelas saying unnerving things that at least related to Politics and The Whites and The Blacks and All That. But when it came to the Thapelos and the Bensons lifting the lid on the primeval whirlpool of superstition ... well, to avoid this realm would to my mind have been to put on blinkers. But to publish it was to stand naked in the highway of consumer rejection and shout “hit me!”

One night a fellow-guest at a dinner was holding forth on a ground-breaking *Spectator* article by Andrew Kenny. This article was a recycling of one Andrew did in *Frontline* a year ago. Why would my fellow guest miss it in his own home-grown forum, and be so proud to find it long later in in a journal built on the in-jokes of a distant culture? He was abashed. He said “okay, sorry ... but to find the good stuff in *Frontline* you have to wade through all that African crap.”

That was representative. Economics spoke clearly. It said: keep away from the Thapelos. But I didn’t listen. I don’t complain. It was choice. I got something from the Bensons

and Thapelos. I liked their visits. I beheld their pages in a newly published edition with fondness. Also, if they weren't in *Frontline* where would they be? The *Spectator/New Yorker* segment of readership said "they belong in *Drum*", but they didn't. There were downmarket black publications to ooh and aah about ghosts amputating children's organs, but the upmarket ones shied away from the whys and wherefores of witchcraft's grip. My own black readers revolted. To many of them – Nthato Motlana was captain of this team – witchcraft was a brake, a bad memory. I'd say it's a huge reality for half the population, our job was to deal with the realities around us. "Not this one", Nthato urged.

But I couldn't tell Thapelo "sorry, the biggest thing in your part of our country's life makes commercially important readers switch to the *Spectator*." What he called "real African things" came up, on and off, until the end. In fact the end end, coincidentally on edition 100, was despite a classic "reprieve" piece; Benson Ntlemo on village dynamics after a tornado. This was not "damage is estimated at RX-million". It was who accused whom of bewitching who, plus the sordid and sad class wars between brick-house owners and mud-house owners over relief funds. Had there been an edition 101 Benson would have featured, making 102 all the less likely but leaving this reader, for one, with a fuller picture.

Generally the witchcraft school needed plenty of editing. Strangely, my explicitly low-life specialist needed nil.

A face poked round the ajar door of 402 Dunwell. I said "come in" and a person entered. He had evidently slept on a park bench. He'd lost his razor, his shirt had endured since the Verwoerd administration, one of his soles slapped on the floor. I was reaching for 50 cents when he said he wanted to speak to Mr Beckett. I said he was doing that thing. He wouldn't believe me. He said editors don't sit at reception rooms where anybody just walks in.

This was Steven Ashley Botha. Steve had brought a handwritten essay on Pretoria Central Prison, a resident's view.

I looked at it with little relish. It was nine yards long and I knew the species: a semi-literate hard-luck story that would take a ton of editing to deliver a gram of content.

But I couldn't inflict the indignity of rejection on sight. I had to read enough to say "very interesting, but ... most unfortunate ... policy constraints ... try the *Weekly Mail*."

I started reading, and after a page a bomb could have gone off and I wouldn't have lifted my head.

Six thousand words later I came to the "copyright" logo with which Steve signs off his endeavours. I had to publish his story in all its length, accompanied by his own cartoon strips of prison jokes.

"Concrete Island" featured in the next edition – keeping company, I may say, with two people later to make marks; a lovely low-key landscape graphic by Janina Pechova and a searing lid-lifter on police misbehaviour by Sam Sole.

That was the beginning of a friendship, a one-way one in that I can never find Steve. He finds me. It might be a rescue call from a police station at 3 a.m. It might be a letter from a hobo mission. It might be a phone call from his latest employer, usually either a printer or a builder.

Steve finds jobs. Dozens per year. He picks up skills like you pick up a dropped key-ring. At a construction site, say, he'll see "carpenters needed". He walks in, he says "here I am". They say "where are your papers?" He snaps his fingers in silly-me manner. He says, tsk, what a pity I left them at my auntie's house in Tweedoringspruit, but she's put them in the post and they'll surely arrive by Friday.

Then he says "but I can do the job, I'll show you."

For a week or two the foreman brags like mad: he has the find of the century; this guy does ten men's work with a machine's accuracy. The next week, Steve either goes on a binge and vanishes, or, more individually, gets a dose of moral outrage and gets up and walks out, stone cold sober.

Steve doesn't believe in bullying, is the thing. Any bullying, of any humble person, never mind colours and stuff. The foreman

couldn't believe it. They'd yell some routine bit of abuse at some defenceless guy and Steve goes puce and his head shakes and he talks to himself, muttering that this is a not a place to be, and he gets up and walks out. No pay, no notice, gone; finish.

Steve was a carpenter on Epsom Downs, a fancy block on the best side of town. He wrote a gem on his workmates building a place from which they'd be evicted on sight if they showed their faces when it was running. His bosses discovered that his "missing" papers did not exist, but he was their best worker so they said he could stay if he took a pay cut. Steve looked over the foreman's shoulder "and there was a guy wheeling a barrow of cement with his head bent over and it called to mind the pictures I have seen of Egyptian friezes where the slaves did all the work and I thought: No." That was Steve all over.

Whatever genius is, Steve has it, like Van Gogh. He paints like Van Gogh, too, though urban streets and buildings. From here, he could go anywhere. That's true of all of us, literally, but it's extra-true for him. Will the 21st century write his biography and divide his career into Blue Periods and Cube Periods? Hard to believe, but look what Van Gogh's contemporaries believed. Steve certainly did a lot to make *Frontline* worthwhile, anyway.

But printers don't take worthwhiles and nor did the greengrocer. In February '86 I had the obituary written and photocopied and ready to mail off – pitiful little wail, too – when Andrew Kenny unexpectedly delivered his experiences as an apprentice engineer in a mill in Lancashire. Lancashire is 10,000 km from *Frontline*'s stamping-grounds, but this piece was brilliant. Plus, full of echoes of SA issues. The obituary was held over and my door-knocking knuckle was once again applied to the advertiser circuit.

One had-to-be-published item made people puke; me, too. A soldier, from the Recces, the terrorist-catchers on the Angola border, told his tale. He did not seek to win friends. This was the first time that I perceived my nation's army as not a misguided place of good intentions, but an instrument of evil. To my mind, that was the most bannable thing I ever published, and,

by Murphy's law, the cover of that edition was asking for strife.

The cover, which went with a different story, was a cartoon by the late Derek Bauer; Derek at his brutal best, the dove of peace crapping on PW Botha's head. PW's expression was brilliant, but.... I made Derek remove the big gooey splat all over the bald pate and leave it to the imagination.

Was I right or wrong? I seldom have trouble knowing that, after the event. (The score is about equal). In this case I don't know. I had two considerations: [i] if I wasn't super-nervous about the Recce I might have left the splat. [ii] crap on an old guy's head was never *Frontline's* stock-in-trade; perhaps I used the Recce as a fig-leaf.

Of course, my super-democracy quest had many must-be-published moments. Mostly, this meant my own latest explication, but one was memorable for all the right reasons.

I wanted an image of an after-apartheid that worked, and conceived of an idealised parliament, populated by Nats and Conservatives and ANC and everyone between.

This picture took some procuring. It meant a lot of recognisable faces positioned in a recognisable House of Assembly. Which meant each face being some seven millimetres deep. A lot of artists wouldn't take this on. The first one who thought he could handle it, art-wise, changed his mind shortly afterwards, law-wise. These faces included three that were problematic; two, slightly problematic; one, um, very.

I ended with a new and unlikely supplier, Johann, in a tiny ancient house in low-rent town. I brought photographs. PW Botha, president; Andries Treurnicht, his far-right challenger; Alan Boesak, political priest; Minister Pik Botha; Inkatha's MG Buthelezi; Sam Motsuenyane "the black Oppenheimer"; the Indian House's Amichand Rajbansi; Saths Cooper, chief Black Consciousnik; Eric Mafuna, business's crown-prince-apparent; the PFP's Helen Suzman; and another twenty known faces, as seen on the news. Then, three faces that were never seen on the news: OR Tambo, ANC president; Thabo Mbeki, ANC employee; Nelson Mandela, prisoner.

Tambo's and Mbeki's likenesses were not illegal; just risky, risking a banning order or a charge of "furthering the aims of a banned organisation". Mandela's likeness was illegal. He was in jail, the law was clear.

Johann was jumpy about the law but jumpier about interpreting almost-seventy-year-old Mandela from the few images I could round up of Mandela pre-forty-five.

On the precision issue, I shrugged: give it a go, your guess is as good as anyone's.

On the legal issue, I mumbled that nobody knew this was Mandela; it was an imaginary person standing up and speaking to an imaginary parliament. Johann didn't buy that, sensibly, but he did say the job was "too interesting not to do"; good man. He wouldn't put his name to it, though, (one result is that I forget his surname, with apology.)

Johann's magnum opus was scheduled as the cover of the July edition, 1986. Sad to say, July was abolished. Ads bookings amounted to eight pages. Was this the time for *Frontline* to say Goodbye Cruel World? Obviously not. Johann had to see the light of day. With cap in hand, heart in mouth, pride in pocket, I knocked on the door of 47 Sauer Street, *The Star's* building and the Argus headquarters, to ask my old boss Jolyon Nuttall if he'd care to buy *Frontline*. He didn't. *Frontline's* sole balance-sheet "value" was, ignominiously, its assessed tax loss. Jolyon was not about to pay *Frontline's* bills, but he did, with a magnanimity I consider breath-taking, offer a "publishing partnership" which gave me access to Argus people and facilities.

Boosted, I prevailed (embarrassingly) upon most of July's advertisers to shift to August, and *Frontline* greeted humankind for the 54th time, with a new lease on life, a healthy 16 pages of paid ads, and Johann's cover.

The first thing about that cover is that when it appeared everyone who saw it said unhesitatingly "that's Mandela". Four years later Mandela appeared, and Johann's guess proved enormously, eerily, right (unlike most pre-release efforts, including Time's computer-aided cover.) Johann showed 25

other definite people too (and some, like Thabo Mbeki in the Speaker's chair, who you could argue over).

The second thing is: to a lot of people the concept of a shared parliament was both mouthwatering and out of reach. There was anger. "Naïve", "deceptive", "utopian", "dreamland"...

The best complaint, though, came by phone to the answering machine: "I protest at the errors in your picture of an imaginary parliament". Pause. "Firstly, the Mace goes on top of, and not in front of, the Clerks' Table. Secondly, the clock shows 9.00 but the House is already in session."

The third thing is: not a squeak from security police or publications control. Did they like that cover? Did they fume quietly, scare to look stupid thumping it? Angazi, dunno.

Diane Victor, artist, pulled *Frontline* back from the brink, with a marvellous rich drawing of changing times in the magistrate's court. And one time the lifeline was a piece of my own that *nothing* to do with new-and-improved democracy. This was furious paragraph called "Circus Clowns".

In the 1987 election the Progressives, PFP, dipped out, losing several seats by miniscule margins. I didn't carry a special candle for the PFP. Their policy was laden with what I considered gimmickry, like the minority veto, and I'd heard too much anti-Afrikanerism, anti-lower-classism, anti-blackism and general snobbery underlying pious public pronouncements. But the PFP was by a long way the best of a dud lot and I had no time for the suicide-lefty line idea that you do not sully yourself with nasty racist ballot papers; you wash your hands and pronounce the election a circus.

The lefties got a campaign going, not least in the universities, and the student union, Nusas, arranged an anti-election for the noble in spirit. All very gung-ho until the day after the election, when the sky fell in under the rise of the Right and the collapse of the Progs. Opposition voices wept and wailed, including, with impressive effrontery, the Left voices that a day ago had treated PFP voters as risible sell-outs.

Several constituencies where the Progs lost by a whisker

were university territory. I felt that the arithmetic deserved attention. I asked Nusas for their election figures. These were uncanny. Again and again, the Prog shortfall balanced the Nusas voters. Of course, not all anti-voters were enfranchised, or registered in that constituency, but the thrust was plain: had the holier-than-thous deigned to tarnish their purity the Progs could be ten seats to the good.

In the regular press I only saw Ken Owen, SA's punchiest columnist, note this phenomenon. Ken came up with sentiments similar to mine but without the quantification angle which, rough as it was, I wanted to give a look-in – for the bad reason of seeing righteous lefties bang their heads as well as the good reason of deterring future shootings-in-foot.

My angry paragraph dropped its specklet into the pond. For quite a while I heard boycotters telling me that maybe they'd re-think next time. But I felt I'd ducked the real point, the inadequacy of a political system dependent on accident.

Those ten seats jointly delivered maybe 70,000 Nat votes and 69,000 Prog. Result Nats: 10, Progs: 0, demise of liberalism widely proclaimed. A little-known Prog councillor announces from Australia that the election proves there is no hope, he has fled SA. His five minutes of fame follow. The Progs lose the resulting by-election. Voters say in bulk: you're losers and you run away. Accident creates reality.

By the time of Circus Clowns I'd argued for three years that there was a sounder, more solid, way of playing the political game. One reason I made no headway was that people thought politics had to be about winners and losers, chance and risk. I had thought so too. Now I began to suspect that chance and risk could be erased; maybe losers too. Was a new mode of politics on the way, to be to human affairs what tungsten was to lighting or silicone to technology?

I was attuned to focusing on the faults of the structure instead of the faults of the people, but I now felt that the secure structure would do more than stabilise the playground; it would change the players.

The Circus paragraph staved off another near-axing.

What was scheduled to do much more than stave off axes – to dispel axes – was the arrangement with *The Star*.

The partnership meant they'd bring no money; bear no blame; have no corporate link. They'd manage *Frontline*, arm's length, handling production and circulation and ads and taking a fee from the ensuing profits, while I edited it as per Plan A. In theory it was perfect, except for having to tell Tony Sutton "sorry, design is going to Sauer Street".

In practice, *The Star's* machinery didn't slot this gnat into its systems. One example: in converting the subscription list, small-town subscribers were relocated to the city with the closest initial. Kelly Molete at PO Box 113 Phuthaditjhaba was screeching where's my *Frontline* while the post office was returning as Unknown a Kelly Molete at PO Box 113 Pretoria.

Moreover, I was a terrible partner, much worse than I could bring myself to admit and much much worse than I intended to be. For one thing the allegedly sparky, lively, even-handed etc approach to issues that had made *Frontline* worth courting was crushed and bleeding under the boulder of my fixation on introducing an unwilling world to a better way of running things. For another, after seven years of playing dice with deadlines, not to say with the calendar, I thought that getting away with it was a God-given personal right, my trade-mark. This view did not chime with the ethic that had made the Argus company the king of the press.

On the rainiest day in years Jolyon and I met for a sort-out session. "Lunch at the Rand Club?" Jolyon had said.

This was a good omen. I don't know that I'd want to join the Rand Club but I loved being a guest. The building is the noblest in Jo'burg; you smell Jock of the Bushveld's turd on Sir Percy Fitzpatrick's boot, you hear the Reform Committee badmouthing Paul Kruger. It was a tad surprising that Her Most Gracious Majesty, Defender of The Faith and Protector of The Seas Etcetera, looking like Elizabeth Taylor at 30-odd, reposed in ermine robes at the head of the great central staircase,

especially in a place that disallowed women, but that's where the club came from. They had blackballed Afrikaners; they had blackballed Jews. Persons with pigment and persons without penises weren't in consideration. But they'd re-thought, for instance after Afrikaner councillors put a bus rank at their doorstep, and formerly blackballed Jewish traders gobbled up a formerly dominant empire, and a fellow named Tutu became Bishop of Johannesburg, their ex-officio honorary chaplain.

By the late '80s what mattered was a suit. You could be any colour, any gender, any tribe, but you couldn't be a man without a suit. I was in my suit, for the occasion; made me feel important. Jolyon and I had a fine meal and resolved one more time that we needed more of this and more of that, a push here and a shove there. Afterwards while we waited in the foyer for Jolyon's driver to make his way through the downpour, I snapped and said we didn't need more push and more shove, we needed a total recasting. Jolyon snapped in turn and said perhaps we should quit. I said fine, and there it was.

The air in Jolyon's Mercedes was colder than the air outside was wet, and when we got to Sauer Street I was too uptight to ask his driver, a guy named Samson Maila whom I'd known for twenty years, to take me back to Mayfair, where we had moved. I ducked and skidded from eve to awning until I found a bus stop and there I sheltered in the doorway of Edura House to wait for a bus.

The doorway is twenty paces off the road, across a mini-piazza, and not a lot of bus drivers are scanning distant doorways for potential passengers, so when I saw a bus coming I'd dart out to meet it. But Mayfair is on the way to the bus yards, so four out of five buses are going off duty. I was scurrying across the piazza to meet oncoming buses that sailed past, and scurrying back until the next one came, and getting wetter with each foray, and finally when the Mayfair bus hove up that was the one I did not get to. I stood in the rain and watched it disappear, and looked for a callbox to get Nomavenda to fetch me.

When I found a callbox it was vandalised, so I popped in to

an Indian numberplate shop and asked to use the phone. Sorry, they said, broken. I came out and looked around for What Now. A black youth leaving the numberplate shop stopped to lecture me, a bumpkin in need of streetlore. “You can’t ask for the phone”, he said, “or they can only say ‘twenty cents’. You must go in with two rand in your hand.”

I thanked him and reached for two rand, and found I had only shrapnel; not even a busfare, never mind the tenfold phone premium. The rain had abated and my suit had already swum the Limpopo, so I pointed west and walked.

Halfway to Mayfair a car pulled up, hooting. I peered in and saw a guy named Rims, who we’d met a few times at his cousin’s house in Lenasia years before. Rims had been a carpet and curtain dealer, never missing a chance to push a sale, to the mortification of the cousin. The only time I heard Rims not talking sales was at a party after the ’76 bust-up, when he mortified his cousin even more. Pulling a pistol from a shoulder holster and waving it wildly he yelled: “You whites! You care nothing for us! You hog the police to keep your suburbs safe, way over there, miles from Soweto. And us! We’re right next door!”

By this wet afternoon in 1989 Rims had diversified. He frowned at my soaking suit and said he had a new imported line he could let me have cheap. He had also prospered. In case I failed to detect that from his ten-yard car with on-board phone and push-button everything, he gave me all the numerals the tax man would like to hear.

Reaching my office on the Fordsburg border, his face fell. “This is where you work?” he said incredulously. “Man, this is where I started” .

That building held a rare slice of Jo’burg history. It was from outside my huge window, its sill wide enough to sleep on, that on March 15 1922 the bugle sounded for the last charge of the Rand Revolution. But I knew what Rims was getting at.

He had no education and a caricature Indian accent, and he worked his way up and out of Indian Fordsburg. I’d had a silver

spoon – he and his friends had oohed and aahed at the five degrees Gael and I shared – and look what had happened. He shook his head sorrowfully and said, “Man, you must stop this fooling with politics and stuff. You can still make a career, I know it, I have faith in you.”

Rims took his faith and his limousine off and I went inside. The extractor fan from the fast-foods joint had packed in again, so I was hit by a fog of rancid cooking oil. The rain had turned the foyer into a mud-pool and the office was empty. Rachel Browne was off ill. A note from NomaV said she was “researching”. There was no good reason to mope in the office, and very good reason to take off my suit.

I made for the sauna at the Country Club and ladled on the steam and counted the reasons why not to go get a real job. There were two: (1) It was a chickening-out. (2) I’d have to refund a fortune of advance subscriptions.

Too bad. Objections were overruled. That night I told Gael I was going to get a real job. She was not opposed. Next day, a Friday, there was no NomaV. The office felt moribund. It was time to close. All weekend I was certain.

On Monday, NomaV produced a story, pages and pages, on Winnie Mandela; installment two.

This was a riveting piece of work. It was not about to appear anywhere else. Journo fashion had ceased to venerate Winnie, but did not yet know whether actual criticism was kosher. Worse, NomaV, while hardly seeking Winnie’s PR account, was brutal on the liberation priesthood who had blocked their eyes when Winnie reigned but, now that she was down, “descended on her like vultures” to “heap all blame on one pair of shoulders”.

Let alone her judgments, NomaV had done mind-blowing reportage. She put names and flesh to rumours that the nation bandied in the abstract. It had to be published. Oh, dear.

Winnie 2 was not the only must-be-published. I had a blockbuster of my own on Boksburg, in its five minutes of fame as Capital of the Right. It was the best thing I’d written, then, but it was almost a book. No-one but *Frontline* would take it.

With it came several must-be-published pictures by Juhan Kuus, including a portrait of Boksburg's mayor, Beyers de Klerk, in his robes and his dignitas with his Bijbel. (As cover of the next-but-one edition, that picture stunned people. Little did they know. Juhan and I had been furious that Beyers kept the Bible's "twin", his gun, under his robes.)

Also I had a bucket of must-be-published super-democ, of course. I'd toned down, in response to yawns and jeers of "Utopia!" but it was strategic toning-down, not defection. And for that, there was no outline but *Frontline*.

So ... lateral thinking occurred. We'd run five more editions. I'd sell the ads myself, again, and emotionally blackmail everyone who said how good it was to have off-beat voices. With only five more editions to go, they'd (1) feel guilty and (2) be so glad I was about to get off their backs that they'd cough up.

The next edition was fat with ads, as per plan. (And there was one less rumble in the atmosphere: Tony was back on layout with the exuberance of re-start.) But there was also a Countdown note, telling readers of the five more *Frontlines*.

And then came the protests, with startling force. Here was the kind of audience I'd always liked to think we had but never really believed we did have. Free State farmers, Azapo office-bearers, exiled revolutionaries, homeland ministers, a microcosm, saying that to close *Frontline* was to take something out of their lives. Some said it with a lot of heat. I have the file here two years later and I have only replied to half, forgive us Lord for that which we leave undone.

Additionally there were calls and street-corner comments, and editorial urgings from *Finance Week* and *Rapport* and points between, and one reader, Graham Livingstone, got a communal trust-fund on the go

To say I was "touched" would be wrong. I was floored. And inspired. I stiffened the aching sinews and cranked up the creaking engine and declared though clenched teeth: this time we're going to get things going permanently.

The April edition, encasing the gunless mayor in vivid scarlet, had a smell and feel of freshness, places to go to.

So it came to pass. There were places we were going to. But we failed to factor in one place: the Supreme Court.

18

Courtrooms

I AM HAPPY TO ASSURE YOU THAT NASCITURUS PRO IAM NATO habetur, quotiens de commodis eius agitur. Which is to say that a foetus may be treated as a living person provided that it is subsequently born alive.

This is a neat principle of inheritance law and a neater example of law-student knowledge. Real lawyers get flabbergasted when I quote them nasciturus. They have been doing real law; they forgot nasciturus 20 minutes after the exam. Defected law-graduates like me remember their nascituruses forever but can't read a summons.

Buthelezi won his judgment in the Natal Supreme Court. I couldn't believe it. To me this was naked travesty, open and shut. I had to appeal. To leave it there was no option.

I was also with hindsight shocked to learn how much sleepwalking I'd been doing. My nasciturusy mind had failed to imbibe how a plea of justification – that is, “it wasn't wrong to say they're thugs, because they are thugs” – deepened my

moral guilt and heightened Buthelezi's award. Not that our plea was going to change, but I felt I'd been in a bubble through half the case. Which may explain how I had succumbed to Edwin's idea that I stay out of the witness box, letting the judge think "must be villainous, this one, can't face cross-examination"

But what was done was done. We appealed to the highest court, the Appellate Division in Bloemfontein. It took an eternity to come up, during which Inkatha's belligerent ways became daily news. On the plane to Bloem I read *The Star* and the *Transvaler*. Both editorialised on Inkatha. Both used the term "thugs", "boewe" in *Die Transvaler*. It was as if the cosmos wished to reassure me. I'd been thumped because Stephen Robinson employed the term shortly before it became a cliché. We couldn't lose.

Next day I sat in the beautiful 19th century mahogany of the Appellate Division and watched us lose.

We had the Chief Justice, no less, with four appeal judges. They painstakingly dissected each word of the offending phrase: "The Zulu leader is not everybody's cup of tea. He is nauseatingly pompous and his well-drilled impi regiments are among the most thuggish operators in South Africa". When I say "each word", what I mean is: each word. The word "and" occupied several thousand rands worth of attention. Then we got to "his". Did "his" mean that he drilled the regiments? That they answered to him? What of "regiments"? Didn't "regiments" imply polished boots and brass buttons like Grenadier Guards?

There were two good things about this ludicrous day. One was the courtroom. It was the first time I'd seen the inside of the Appellate Division and I couldn't help but bask in its venerability. The other: I was again inexpressibly relieved not to be a lawyer. I nearly had been, after all, and indeed technically I am. A yellowing document in an archive in Pretoria records that D.P.Beckett was admitted as an Advocate of the Supreme Court of South Africa in May, 1974.

Sensible people ask how I could forsake this golden profession for journalism, even lower on status than it is on lucre. The big answer is that I could look for truth where I thought I might

find it, not where my client told me to find it. The Buthelezi case showed another answer sharply: as a journalist, one needn't, normally, thrust yourself into combat. You might criticise, yes, but your success was not dependent on someone else's loss. Through years in writing I've hardly felt my bowels twisting in personal animosity. Mere days in court made me malignant towards several people on the other side, and in particular Gatsha's senior counsel, David Gordon. I have no real reason to suppose that Gordon is any more frail and flawed than the rest of us. If he'd been my father-in-law I might quite like him. But doing his job to pull out all the stops and nail me, I saw him as Eliza Doolittle saw Higgins. If I'd found him yelling, "Help I'm going to drown", I'd get dressed and go to town.

Lunch in the Bloemfontein Club was very lawyerly: knots of opposing teams avoiding each other or turning their backs, huddling together in hostile cliques where rival advocates badmouthed each other with a vehemence that relegates journalists to the little league. That's too much price for the income that goes with it, and the income itself is not a one-way blessing. I'd love to see the entries on my bank statement but I'd feel ill sending out the invoices.

A year or more after the case I bumped into David Gordon in Johannesburg. I'd mellowed a bit and gave him a moderate hullo. He looked away and I thought that was telling; he'd done all the giving of offence and I hadn't had a chance to give any back, and he's the one who couldn't look in my eyes. Perverse ol' world, or perverse profession at least.

Bloem was not a nice time. Apart from the sense of the case slipping out of our grasp, we'd attracted an entourage of anti-Butheleziites who did not make me comfortable.

Another "political" appeal was being heard, one of the last apartheid eviction orders. This case had a fan-club of potential evictees demonstrating outside, and police were present, 30 men or so, in peacetime uniform. This seemed an okay precaution for police to take when hundreds of heated people gather in protest, but to the anti-Buthelezi gang it was Apartheid Brutality. They

talked loud and caustic, needling police, needling Afrikaners, needling people who wear uniforms and take orders. As far as the cops could see, this lot were my gang, there to support me, one breath telling me what a hero I was to give Buthelezi strife, next breath sneering about Dutchmen and hairybacks.

When someone said “Check those fuckin’ fascists, dying to break black heads”, I jolted, looked again, saw men milling, chatting, leaning on their bakkies, tilting faces to the sun, and lost my cool. Suddenly, there almost was the violence the police were there for, but within a defence team.

Inside the court there was a similar disjunction. Inkatha’s ready recourse to the axe was as disgusting to me as to anyone, but I didn’t see good-guys/bad-guys. Inkatha pangamen were terrified – of Xhosa rule, of rebellious youth, of their worlds turning inside out, of ANCs catching them alone. They had to hear “the new world has space for you.” Not “shut up, vanish, you’re relics.”

The worst of Inkatha was horrible but the best was marvellous. You could visit a KwaZulu school at 8.05 and find classes full, teaching happening, the syllabus being covered. Public accounts were intact. Hardly any hands were in hardly any tills, olde-worlde courtesy was at apotheosis. Zulu culture, at rest, was a wonder, though when confrontation entered it leapt to instant boil. When all this dignity was locked to the reign of the ballot, these guys would fly.

Flying is not what I was doing in Bloemfontein. Try as I might I could not find it in my soul to regret that word “thuggish”, but when the Chief Justice folded his papers we knew we’d lost.

It would be months before judgment was official. These were not good months. When we found a long-sought small piano for our oldest child, the youngest broke down. We couldn’t see why. We had to wait for the sobbing to abate: “What’s the good of a piano if Buthelezi takes our house?”

I had been sanguine about funds, after in the last round being offered more than we needed. This time, the case was finished and I’d lost, and the money was going to Buthelezi’s lawyers.

The enemy's enemy was no longer such a friend, and could you take offence? If I support Jim only because he's fighting my enemy Jack, and Jack knocks him out and says "now pay me for doing that", I wouldn't be keen.

For a foreign free-speech foundation that I was referred to, it was even simpler: "If you were black and he was white we could help". I was desperate. And then ... and then ... in stepped the guardian angel named Raymond Louw.

Ray did a whiparound in circles where he has clout, and while I ended up paying Buthelezi's R12,000 award, it was deeper pockets who paid his legal team's fees, tenfold more. If food was taken from my children's mouths, it was only second-helpings.

While it's clear that I lost, I doubt that there was a winner. At an Inkatha function at the Carlton months later, Buthelezi was reciting his virtues until Nigel Bruce, editor of the *Financial Mail*, stood up and said, "in that case please explain why you sued Beckett." While a hundred journalists watched, Buthelezi squirmed and mumbled and looked as red faced as a black man can.

Patrick Laurence, most scrupulous of columnists, thereupon rose and in his measured manner raised a raft of points in light of which he asked if Buthelezi remained confident of the "wisdom and integrity" of suing me. Buthelezi wanted the roof to fall in, but mustered an unctuous hope, addressed to me, that there were no hard feelings.

There weren't, I said, as one does. It was a lie, as I suppose it always is. I cursed myself for being too chicken, or confused, or inarticulate, to say anything real.

Real things did get said, though, most notably by James McClurg, the Argus group's media columnist.

Whatever the term is for the exact opposite of a hatchet man, McClurg is it. By his standards the rapier is a blunt instrument. He employs the laser, you don't feel the blood spill until you look at the floor. He dissected the issue and with infinite mildness showed it up as a crock, from writ to verdict.

Much feedback came to me, all of it indignant. Letters

attached a diverse range of cuttings referring to Inkatha as “thugs” or worse. Some quoted famous wrong libel judgments – Liberace getting damages for “homosexual”, before he came out of the closet; Lloyd George for “adultery”, later proven. None of this made me the “winner” but it did tell me that many people were as bamboozled as I was.

Also, I had echoes of some feedback that went to Buthelezi, including a backer dropping him and an ally leaving him. I don’t believe his “victory” brought him joy. A while later, when he broke down at a much-publicised prayer meeting and wept about his conscience, I was much urged, not always tongue-in-cheek, to assure him that if returning my money would ease his conscience he should feel free. That was an idea I did not take up. But I did believe there was an error in play and I drafted a long earnest letter to the Chief Justice to say so.

I knew this was an unorthodox route. I’d taken some of those before, but this time, at the last minute, doubts arose. I went to see my former boss Judge Nick Nicholas.

Nick had given me lots of firm counsel, mainly twenty years ago when I drafted reviews for him. This time he surpassed himself. He asked why the decision was wrong. I said: obvious, look at any newspaper. He asked why two courts would reach a wrong decision. I said: obvious, Buthelezi is the white establishment’s Favourite Black.

Half a hour later, in relief, I tore up my letter and dropped the scraps in a bin at the bottom of Nick’s hill.

Point one, paraphrased from Nick’s meticulous wording and consummate elocution, was that if I thought either of these courts would let a political sentiment intrude on their interpretation of the law, I was out of my tiny mind.

Point two was that even if the Chief Justice had a blinding revelation with fiery chariots, there was nought he could do. The highest court had spoken, and it could not unspeak.

Point three was that whatever the newspapers may say, the judges judged on evidence, and the evidence we had led was of a couple of guys being slapped around a bit.

Point four was how common it was for parties to lawsuits to come to believe in – truly, deeply, be sure of – the rightness of their cause, even people who would absolutely insist “not, me, I’m objective, I look at all sides”.

The case of *Beckett vs Buthelezi* legally immaculately creates an outrageous truth: that to say “thuggish” of Inkatha’s activities in the 1980s was impermissible. I’m not a guy who is greatly hung up about “legacy”. All I really want is not to embarrass my kids. It bugged me a little that I had sleepwalked. It bugged me a lot that the most perfectly lasting thing I had done – the Law Reports are forever; the body of precedent – was to cause a freak judgment. If there is a redeeming feature, it is that this case might one day contribute to an erasing of ways by which right law can have a wrong effect.

Meantime, history was about to half-repeat itself. I was about to again grace the Law Reports, again in a case before the Chief Justice.

Johnny Johnson, editor of *The Citizen* wanted R50 000, for Stephen Robinson calling him “depraved”.

This gave Stephen an interesting full-house. I published two Robinson articles, I received two lawsuits. I hadn’t seen lawsuits at Frontline, otherwise. Banning orders, yes, three in total, but nine years had brought forth a total of one written grievance. That was from Willem Wepener, editor of *Beeld*, who didn’t whisper a word of threat, he merely said he expected better. So of course we corrected and apologised.

“Depraved” was never meant to imply that Johnson flashed schoolgirls. That was self-evident. It was a crack at his weird writing. I thought it was unduly thin-skinned to take offence, but if he was offended I was willing to apologise. I wrote to him, offering to come and discuss it.

By July 4, 1988, when I wrote that letter, I’d graduated to a word processor for real writing, but one-paragraph stuff was easier to bang out on my trusty World War Two black upright Underwood. A sheet into the roller, a couple of clang-clangs of the carriage return, clackety-clack on those long-drop keys with

their symphony of piano-like levers, fingers in the works once or twice to disentangle typebars, couple of dabs of tip-ex and there you are. Sign it, lick the sticky bit and close the envelope, write an address, and the marvellous Minister of Everything Else, Rachel Browne, would take it away, stamp it, and post it on her rounds to the bank.

Rachel, like all her predecessors, often said I should make copies. I said yeah, yeah, don't worry, I will, where necessary. Which would not include a tiny note saying, "Sorry chap, no hurt intended, I'll come and see you" .

If that sounds simplistic/imbecilic, I remind you that not long ago most people didn't think of keeping copies of personal letters. Businesses kept letters; I kept money letters, contract letters. The Johnny letter was to a guy with a gripe. That wasn't business, to me. To Rachel, it was. She saw the address, she knew the gist, she opened the envelope, photocopied the letter, and sent it on, saying nought to me.

A month later, Johnson hadn't replied. I repeated my offer, same bang-it-out, same single sheet. Rachel repeated her intervention, and quietly passed two letters to Andy.

Johnson never replied. We met in court – in, ironically, blazing publicity. The Buthelezi case, meaning-laden, came and went semi-noticed. The Johnson case, meaning-free, had fresh pics every day of me entering court, me leaving court, Johnson entering court, Johnson leaving court, and a full range of the smatterings called "highlights", such as my counsel, Martin Goldblatt, saying that Johnson was "no Damon Runyon" , and me saying that his column, Height Street Diary, was "wacky" .

Of course, the news came out all wrong. A person who watches headlines would assume that a vicious nut this Beckett must be, walking around calling people "depraved" . Depraved is a hairy term. We accepted that it was hairy. No dispute. If I tell you "Joe is depraved", just like that, you wonder what foul disgusting things does Joe do.

But ... here we had a foreign correspondent lambasting the South African press's adjectives on the manifold occasions

that they quote the Brit press – the “normally balanced Daily X” or the “hostile Sunday Y” and grasping the moment for an extra fusillade: British writers didn’t need labels like “the nauseatingly smug Hogarth, the invariably soporific Harvey Tyson, or the increasingly depraved Johnny Johnson.”

Hogarth was the *Sunday Times* column written mainly by the editor, Tertius Myburgh. Harvey Tyson was the editor of *The Star*. Myburgh laughed, Tyson ignored.

Perhaps 10,000 people read the article, of whom I’d strongly bet that only one saw “depraved”, in that context, as anything other than a sideswipe at Johnson’s writing style.

But he sued, and “increasingly depraved” became a brief buzz-phrase before the eyes of millions,

Johnson’s Silk was Anton Mostert, who had been a judge and made enormous headlines when he gave a ruling that proved the Info Scandal of 1978. Now Mostert was back at the bar, and saying “My Lord” several times per sentence to Judge Ezra Goldstein who’d been junior counsel when Mostert was in the high seat. Mostert and Goldstein got into tangles. In one exchange they yelled at each other about how “singularly unimpressed” each was with the other’s conduct. Mostert and Martin Goldblatt, barely a decade out of school, got into tangles. Mostert and I got into tangles. In one of these Mostert tried to slither a phrase of Stephen’s – “crimplene toadies” – into looking like a snooty put-down of *Citizen* readers. I said it had nothing to do with *The Citizen* or its readers. (It was attacking State officials who used “the complexity of our situation” to excuse apartheid.) Mostert said “I’m saying it does.” I said he could say what he wanted but he was not allowed to say it on the strength of Stephen’s article. Mostert stood stock still, glowering nuclear missiles at me and turning purple.

We thought he was having a stroke, but no, he pulled himself together and we went into a marathon wrangle about whether I’d said that “anybody” who didn’t read *The Citizen* would not have heard of Johnny, or just “some people”. Then we went through the etymology of “depraved”, from the 16th century

onward. Again I was glad that my career freed me of eternal protraction and causes I did not believe.

I'd had a hard time taking the Buthelezi case seriously. This one was theatre of the absurd. Which doesn't mean I laughed off the prospect of another absurd outcome; goodbye piano, goodbye house. Nor was it fun watching Johnson implode.

By several lengths the least popular figure in SA newspapers, he was also the hardest-working, selecting the *Citizen's* material, editing it, headlining it, rewriting it. He wrote virtually all the leaders, too, the "editor's opinions" that many editors never write and some never read. And his leaders are leaders. He wants you to think in a certain way. He tells you what way, and he tells you so unmistakably. His leaders may not be works of art, but you never come away thinking "um, what was that about?" Of not a lot of editors can that be said, [conceivably even including your current correspondent.]

Moreover you never saw Johnny on the cocktail circuit [which can be said of even fewer]. Doing ten men's work left him not much party-time, but, also, he can't relate to his peers. That was partly politics, at least until the 1990 tumbledrier when the left went right and the right got religion and everyone apologised for their past or their colour or their existence, but more than that, he's sour. He works on it.

One Ken X was once employed in good standing at the *Citizen*, but got into big trouble out-of-hours and put in seven years at Sonderwater Prison. Ken ran the prison library, and subscribed to *Frontline*, and we had a correspondence. When parole drew near, the commandant invited me to visit and I had a most impressive day, struck by Prisons' efforts for departing customers and inspired by their faith in Ken as their most hopeful alumnus. For parole, they needed someone to give Ken work. They'd thought – people did – that *Frontline* was a real company with jobs. Well, that was an error, but Ken and the OC asked if I would intercede with Johnson. This I did, by phone. I told the tale to his secretary, who was also his wife. She put me through. I greeted. Johnson said "mmf". I said half a sentence.

He said “I don’t use jailbirds”, and hung up.

I well recall the sense of shock. You stare in offence at the innocent dead phone in your hand even while your rational lobe wonders what is the point of staring at the phone.

You might not want Johnson at your breakfast table but you had to grant that he was a doer. While I was cross-examined in pernickety line-by-line legalism on his Height Street Diary, he sat wincing, and what I was seeing was not a rude ruffian but a sad old man. I was keen to give him credit for what he got right, but the Diary was where he went “wacky”, and his lawsuit had made his wackiness crucial, and the more we on with the Diary the more imperilled was Mostert’s blood pressure, and finally mine too, and my moment to respect the non-wacky never happened.

When I got off the stand, Goldblatt produced my two letters, as nursed by Rachel and Andy unbeknown to me.

My jaw hung open. Johnson shrunk into himself like a paper bag crumpling. Had Mostert’s cardiologist been there he’d be yelling for an ambulance, and the judge was livid.

The judge was livid at Johnson’s side for rushing to war in disdain of a peace offering, and at my side for coming up with this now. I saw his point: seventeen potentially productive adult persons had spent three days trapped in farce.

To me, this was a dramatic moment. I knew now that we would win. Second, I had a flood of gratitude for Rachel, who would never invade a real privacy but had the nous to invade a nominal one when invasion was right. Third, the judge’s dumping on Johnson sounded like a verdict, and a right one, saying you can’t come to court if you won’t open your ears.

But no, it wasn’t the verdict. Odd enough, it wasn’t even recorded. The entire long argument that was called “Evidence” was part of the record, but this bit now was “Argument”; the stenographer can snooze.

When the official argument ended, though, we got judgment on the spot. The judge went 105% with our view. “A glance at the contents of the Height Street Diary shows what the writer of the article intended to convey by the word ‘depraved’ ... I

would simply regard the word in its context as labelling the plaintiff's work as bad or poor ...”

Case dismissed. Relief!

I turned to hug Gael. Mostert was on his feet: “M’Lord we seek your Lordship’s permission for leave to appeal ...”

We had had a second of freedom; might have been two seconds. Martin Goldblatt bumbled a crappy objection about his client struggling with legal fees. That I did not stand up and claim my own case on the spot ranks high in my list of Great Mistakes. I was too slow, too nervous, too something. Plus, I didn’t believe that what was happening was happening. Didn’t a court case pause at around this point? Next thing the judge was saying – in a very pissed-off manner, I may mention – that he couldn’t refuse anyone the right to a better opinion.

I believe I heard Gael’s heart miss a beat. Andy, in the lawyer’s bench in front, put his head on his hand in eloquence. The orderly yelled Silence in the Court and the judge left. Andy turned and said: “Don’t worry, D. We’ll win in Bloem.” That’s what he’d said in Durban, too. His clairvoyance won no prizes, but for brinkmanship there was none better.

I walked from the Supreme Court door into five minutes of fame; congratulated, complimented, feted. You defeated Johnson! Isn’t it wonderful! I gritted teeth and grinned weakly. (i) I had done nil. (ii) I did not care two cents for defeating Johnson. (iii) It’d be closer to wonderful without new months or years of uncertainty pending an appeal.

“Wonderful” was the word for one person, Martin Goldblatt, new young counsel who beat Anton Mostert and had a feather to pack in his cap as he sailed for Australia. (And fifteen other people got paid for their time, judge and journalists and all, even Andy, from the costs award.) “Wonderful” was not big in my mind, but it was a lot better than Johnson defeating me, so ... let’s celebrate.

A few hours later our team, plus supporters’ club, reconvened at our house. Who should arrive in time for dessert, bearing fancy French champagne, but Stephen Robinson. He was

straight from Tuynhuys, the State President's Cape Town residence, where he had accompanied his boss, the visiting editor of the *Telegraph*, to meet FW De Klerk.

The party was humming pretty well, and Bloemfontein was back of mind, and in an irresponsible moment I bet Stephen that he couldn't do the hat-trick, a third lawsuit from a third article. Stephen said fine; he was about to leave SA for Iraq, he'd do a valediction for the next edition. Gael and Andy commented in short words, that I'm sure are libellous.

It happened that April 1 fell on a Sunday, a couple of weeks later. We were going to lunch at the Duncans' new home, a beautiful Herbert Baker in The Valley Road, old Joburg's classiest address. This house gave me anxieties, over how Andy was to pay for it if I ate all his time.

We arrived very mournful. Andy came to greet and was alarmed: "What's wrong?" he said, "what's happened?"

We'd agreed that Gael could summon more credibility than me. She said sadly: "Haven't you seen the papers?"

Andy shook his head.

Gael looked funereally at the ground and sniffed, "Winnie Mandela's suing Denis".

When Andy recovered, there was laughter all round, but it was laughter too soon. Two months later the legal representatives of Chief Hudson Ntsanwisi, Chief Minister of Gazankulu, requested me to kindly supply R50,000 in compensation for a report by Benson Ntlemo on Ntsanwisi buying votes by giving members of his parliament official cars. I phoned Andy with the news and he said, "Man, you can't fool me with that again, I've already heard it."

Well, that was the third lawsuit, and the last. The suit fell away without much strife.

Unfortunately, so did *Frontline*.

19

London and Murder

NOTHING BOOSTED FRONTLINE LIKE GIVING IT A DEATH schedule. After the Countdown appeared in March '89 a surge of rallying-around occurred. This took many forms and I appreciated them all, but two things stand out, both from occasional contributors. One was Patrick Lee “paying off” a card-table debt by doing a huge amount more work than the debt covered. The other was Rian Malan working a sleight-of-hand in reverse, so that a big sum owed to him by *Rolling Stone* in New York wound up in *Frontline*'s account in return for a small sum that I'd paid him for an article. (That same Patrick had long ago made my “twelve rand cheques” notorious.)

The rallying delivered a manager, Sidney Meyer; an editor, Don Caldwell, and revive-plans and support-plans ... and a lesson, a lesson had escaped no-one; not even me.

Those beautiful heartfelt messages that Countdown produced had demanded more. They pleaded for more, appealed for more. Practically everyone singled out something they wanted

more of: NomaV, often; Terry Baron, often; often our satirical versifier, Knockespotch, retired Norman HC Smith in Sea Point; often Gus Silber, who appeared in as many magazines as you'd find in the newsstands but whose *Frontline* material was viewed by connoisseurs as his summit. Quite often, people specified articles of mine. Mostly, they were too polite to exclude what Tony Sutton called the "head up your ass theorising", so what they frequently did was specify articles they did like.

And I had to learn. It's not that *no-one* wanted more democragonising. But if we had to hold a congress we could do it in a Mini. Most people wanted anything but that.

I heard, I gulped, I blushed. Inwardly I screamed. Audibly I nearly-almost promised that I would shuddup about better ways of running countries and get on with writing things that someone would read. Right after Europe.

A lot of media people owe a lot to Raymond Louw. I am high on the list. Via Ray, I was invited to the International Press Institute congress in Berlin. Then Ray did a thing I could never have tried. He prompted the embassies of Britain, France, and West Germany to each lay on a show-week for me. Already a fairy godfather, now Ray got a halo.

Over the *Frontline* decade I had heard that things happened in a world beyond the Limpopo, but had seen none. Not that *Frontline* was off the junket cycle but that invites went to NomaV, who knew Kennedy International as well as I knew my bus stop. When she walked into my office with a suppressed grin, stroking the back of her black hand, I knew she was off on an all-expenses jaunt to discuss freedom in Lisbon or study democracy in San Salvador or take tea at 10 Downing Street (yes, really, with Mrs Thatcher).

This time, my turn, and a whole month; just a slight little temporary holdover of the nearly-promise to part from mega-democracy. People abroad might be interested, y'know.

The tour meant lots of meetings, usually over lunch, with MPs and South Africa-watchers. The idea was exchange. They'd tell me their betting on our prospects, and then ask for mine.

Mostly, their betting changed a fair bit between the hullo and the goodbye. At first it was good orthodox stuff – crime against humanity ... worthy recent steps forward ... further pressures necessary ...

But the more we fulfilled our duty to vineyards the further the tone shifted, until, usually, they'd say with greater or lesser bluntness that South Africa was a write-off and so was the whole benighted continent. This got up my nose more than somewhat, but that was mutual because when they asked for my words of wisdom I'd sing the new-democracy song and they would wonder how they'd got trapped with this crank.

Once in Paris they actually said so. This was at a classy Seine-side restaurant with three Quai d'Orsay people and my friend Pierre Haski, who had been an institution at Agence France Presse in Johannesburg and was now assistant editor of the lefty paper *Liberation*. The host was France's Under-secretary for Africa who was not agog at my case for France to help South Africa catapult democracy to a higher level than had been reached here in the hub of the universe. He waxed lyrical and amusing (well, to everyone else) about utopia and political lunatics. He wasn't obnoxious about it but departure was in a spirit of "nice time but nothing to it" until he asked jokingly if I was related to Samuel Beckett. I said sure, I was going now to visit him.

French eyes turned to saucers and my forgettability was forgotten. Sam's a serious hero in France, I learned. I instantly became heavyweight by proxy and for the first and I hope only time I felt what it was like to be dismissed for what you are and respected for what somebody else is. If Sam had come up at the beginning they probably would have listened to my politics.

Not that Sam was interested, incidentally, in my politics or in the magical effect of his name or in anything else other than the pain in his decaying body. He was in a clinic near Denfert-Rochereau and he walked like a character from one of his own plays. You could have balanced a bottle on his back except the weight would have crumpled him. We had Jameson's whisky

and dry toast and he said he'd be gone by the end of the year and none too soon. He was right by three days.

In Bonn and London as well as Paris I spoke to Africa-experts large and small and punted the faith. Back home, I figured, the soil was infertile. Everybody had a blocking-point. The ANC fronts had eyes only on picking up the reins when the Nats laid them down. The homeland contingent were as keen on *free* 'free elections' as Genghis Khan. The Nats were adamant that 'one-man-one-vote' was the end of civilisation, and shook their heads and walked away when I said, No, the beginning. The Progs blew fuses at the concept of a morality beyond 'non-racialism'. Moreover, I had rashly (though correctly) said that if the cornered government saw full democracy as the way to go, it needed no permission to introduce it. Going to the people with no holds barred is going further than "negotiations". And there went Fuse No 2: "You can't *impose* democracy! You reach it by consensus!"

Abroad, people saw straighter, fewer parallax problems. Or so I reasoned. And the foreign input on South Africa had run out of steam: "Move away from Apartheid". It was a dirge, going nowhere. They wanted us as a working, stable, nation and not merely as a "non-apartheid" nation. So it was simple, I'd tell them that the better South Africa lay on the far side of the target they were looking at. They'd think it over, they'd say "Oui!" or, if they liked, "What ho!", and new meaning would creep into the urgings directed at Pretoria from across the seas.

On May 1, 1989, I visited the British philanthropist David Astor. A well-intended intermediary had been certain that he would leap to back my "logjam-breaking" initiative.

I sat in the most aristocratic London parlour I had seen outside the movies, and I sang my song. Astor stifled some yawns, and said, "Why make things so complicated? Just oppose apartheid, like the ANC, that's all that's needed."

Walking back to Buckingham Palace Hotel, a mid-level place with a view over its namesake's stables, I realised that today was five years since I first sabotaged *Frontline*.

I remembered this for a freak reason. There'd been pride and jest and champagne toasts, not to the first-ever floating of maxi-democ, but to the first-ever *Frontline* appearing on the first day of the month it was dated.

In point of fact my memory was a bit out. That had been June of 1984, not May. But taking a seat in a park, fresh from Rebuff Number Umpty X, the five-year question was in my head: what had I achieved during it? Answers:

- (1) status of crank and bore,
- (2) bouncing cheques.

Against that, ephemeral stuff – a sense of purpose, an understanding of things not understood before. Would I do the same five years again? Yes. Did I want five new years of the same? No no no no no no please no aaaargh.

When I'd made my not-quite promise to my colleagues, I had been not-quite serious. Now on a faraway park bench, envying the park's cleanliness, it was crystal clear. It wasn't about abandoning *Frontline*. Why had I ever thought like that? It was rescuing *Frontline* from the quirk in my head. As of now, I would slap down the direction-finding molecules in my typing hand. I would get home with but one aim in mind: resuscitate *Frontline* and make it the lively, not to say lucrative, journal it was meant to be.

The finality in my mind surprised me. I had two questions:

- (1) who would be happier: Gael, or my colleagues?
- (2) how had it taken me five years to sober up?

Well, now it was done. I was over the hump.

I took a long detour. There was spring in my step. A load was shed. London was summery and beautiful. The world was fine and the future was bright. At the hotel I showered with a light heart. As I shut the water off I heard the TV news in the bedroom. It said: "... prominent anti-apartheid activist."

I scuttled into the bedroom and there was David Webster in the box behind the news-reader's head. David had done something? Something had happened to David?

Somebody had shot David. He was dead.

My surge of clarity died with him. It had lasted one London rush-hour. How could I go back and be a journalist and a businessman? David didn't need to get killed. He was killed because of the flaw. Whoever shot him believed that what David stood for meant death and destruction. That shooter had to be liberated, it was pressing. He didn't have to love David, I don't suppose David would have loved him. He had to be liberated to believe that life on the other side did not mean the hordes raping his daughter and stealing his house and suppressing him into impotence.

I remembered Jim Bailey's "life more abundant". He had his own, all right, he wanted abundance extended to where it was not known. David had the same target, different route. He was gone now; another reducing, another sign of our lives shrinking, shrinking, in soul, in spirit, in dead friends.

David and I were amiable, not bosom. I'd see him on Jorissen Street; we shared coffees a few times. Once in adjoining barbers' chairs we sparred the liberal/left debate with our heads stiffly straight and our eyes meeting by mirror while our barbers Chris and Albert groaned and wrote us off as kafferboeties. I didn't need David gone, the murderer didn't need him gone, it was a mistake, a mistake that wouldn't happen when the sound society came.

How could I go home to write safe readable pieces on life as it was? I had to hold out life as it could be. Pathfinditis is a dread disease.

When I got back to the office I told my colleagues that I needed just a little more time out, four months, say, or maybe six, to knock off one last book on making democracy work. This would be the very end, really, I knew it. In the meantime, old faces and new faces combined made five, or 5½ with Sally, the commandant of subscriptions. That was a big rich complement. I'd drop out, for a while.

I didn't know it at the time, and definitely didn't intend it, but that was the death-knell.

Don Caldwell produced the next few editions. The idea,

unsurprisingly, was that he would “build on the tradition”. His first edition I couldn’t read. It was standard-form politics with elephantiasis. An election was coming and *Frontline* was a mass of pundits predicting and candidates promising, like the rest of the press but in more words. I raised this with Don, surprising myself that I raised it without knuckledusters. Don said yeah, right, this was building; moving into mainstream areas and giving readers special depth.

This didn’t work for me. We might not have been mainstream, but we had been distinctive, and not boring. I don’t know why I didn’t argue. I think it was sleepwalk taking over.

I pounded out Book 3. At least, I think I did. My body told me I was working like mad, but words somehow did not appear on paper. It was the second Book 3, for one thing, after I’d ditched the first. Tardily did the finger strike the keyboard, mainly to alter the last strike.

Plus I was being hauled off to see advertisers. No longer the supplicant in a queue in the waiting room, I was now supposedly the Distinguished Editor whose presence drew senior execs to lunch. Didn’t seem to be drawing their bookings, though, and through a mist I wondered how after all these twists and turns I was doing what I least wanted to do.

Plus I didn’t read the magazine whose masthead declared me to be its Publisher and Editor. Where it had become a tract for my blinding faith in ultra-democracy it was now becoming a tract for Don’s blinding faith in ultra-free-enterprise. Something failed to jell, but it was through mist.

Plus the office was a different place. Don was young and American. One day he produced two friends, who had come to help us free of charge, how grateful we should be. These were young Americans too, and large presences in every way. A quintessentially Suthefrican institution sounded like a Mississippi bar and felt like a Management Consultancy.

Rachel, who had always taken on anything that came her way and had never encountered a word called “complain”, became scratchy. It was hard to be Lady High Everything Else with two

two-metre new-brooms scouring every corner and pointing out the correct Stateside way of doing everything better. She and her husband, brilliant balladeer Roger Lucey, were about to head off to Cape Town anyway. I think she found *Frontline* easier to leave than it had been.

Why was I supine through this? I don't know. There was fog. I spent day and night, sometimes stretches of more than 24 hours, writing a book that went in circles, vanishing up its own orifices.

Fatherhood saved the day. Christmas '89 we took our children to my parents in the Cape, and our car broke down. And the breakdown had knock-on effects and the knock-ons had more effects.

When we were back in Johannesburg, weeks later, and I contemplated circular Book 3, b, I responded reflexively. My fingers, unbidden, started to do something different. They started to write about the car breaking down.

It was almost like journalism, dealing with the real world, the world as it was, idiosyncratic and crazy and fun and beautiful. I couldn't imagine what I would do with this story, but the fingers flew. And what-next thoughts stayed buttoned-up; they could wait a little.

At home, in solitude, midday on the second of February, fingers were flying when Keith Lister phoned to congratulate me. Congratulate me? For what? It turned out to be a fairly blanket sort of congratulation, for people who had argued that apartheid had to go. I was at sea. He said: "Didn't you hear? Apartheid is over, FW killed it."

I ran for the TV, They were already re-running FW de Klerk at parliament's podium, declaring the New South Africa open. That moment will be re-run for hundreds of years. Never has there been a higher point in a nation's history.

The next Sunday, like everyone, we sat at a screen, waiting and waiting until a figure walked down a prison driveway hand in hand with Winnie. Everybody took a moment in shock, including cameramen splaying in search of someone who

looked like Nat King Cole as depicted by *Time* magazine. Here was the symbol of change. Mandela walking.

We were at a fuzzy TV at the peri-urban home of Lin Menge, who had been the best journalist in the game and for a while my boss at the *Rand Daily Mail*. Lin was known as “Machine-Gun Menge” for her habit of making her point without small-talk. As a junior reporter I gave her a piece of work of which she did not think highly. She had on her desk a plastic bucket with flowers in water. Disdaining wastage of words, she slammed the bucket upside down on my head. For her, I laboured like I laboured for no polite editor who passed the passable and complained only about grammar and spelling.

When Lin left journalism the profession shrank. She went neither to Australia nor to the better pay and lesser stress of PR, but to a one-woman ultra-small-business-development agency, where she lent her own money to hawkers and mealie-braaiers and backyard mechanics. Lin called her activity “Get Up”, swallowed no excuses, bought no hard-luck stories, and did more to put more people into stable business than any number of big-budget showpiece ventures.

To the sounds of our children gamboling in Lin’s duckpond, we watched Mandela enter the wide world and felt emotional.

Everyone felt emotional. Allan Boesak called it the Second Coming; Andries Treurnicht called it the Final Betrayal. Most people fitted on a spectrum between massive excitement tinged with trepidation and massive trepidation tinged with excitement. For me it was 99% hooray, but I had a little one-percent Tsk, all of my own Why? For an excellent reason, that I’ll come to it in a moment.

First, I dispel a lousy reason why I *might* have felt regret. I was being proven wrong, again.

I don’t mind being proven wrong, I get lots of practice. I’d just been proven wrong in the white election of 1989. I’d predicted another Conservative rise, through fear of a government unable to specify where its reforms were heading. Wrong. Afrikaans voters were less fearful and more trusting than I had credited.

Nice reason for being wrong, and no pain attached. Now I'd said the government wouldn't release Mandela until it had a vision of universal franchise being a tolerable place. Wrong again, same nice reason; still no pain. I'd under-rated my countrymen; a good thing to be corrected on.

The underrating factor was ironic, since a standard rebuttal of intensive democracy was "you place too much trust in people". For me, it was fine to be wrong. The case I'm still arguing might be wrong in many places. That's fine. The essence is right: when people run politics much more fully, we'll have much better politics. All the rest can be wrong but I shall blush not once, and I shall never ask for forward movement to be held up until it fits my theory.

The good reason for Tsk was and is really good. We weren't now going to explore. Had the government remained terrified of one-man-one-vote, while the world kept shrieking "Free Mandela or we boycott you", we'd have been very motivated. After the government ran out of tricks and evasions it would alight on ultrademocracy, and we would have stumbled – thanks to pressure – into the next step of the ascent of man.

Now our nation had done a splendid thing. We drank champagne with Lin. (Well, I did, Gael does sparkling water). But we were going to be normal: normal Africa, presumably, not a wholly exciting prospect.

We'd missed our moment. So it goes.

But the logjam was broken. Hard to believe. The whites were coming quietly. Marvellous to behold. But not without questions. How many were coming? How hard would the uncomings fight? Above all, coming to what?

I accepted, sort-of, that a rich democracy was out of the question: the government was not now about to embrace the notion that plenty of power to the people was better than nominal power to the people. Nor was the ANC.

But that left two possible targets: either a compromise deal, leaving a white person a more privileged voter than a dark person or a standard raw vote, everyone equal.

Big damn difference between those two.

I blinked a bit, woke up, and reclaimed my magazine. Don obligingly stayed on but now under the guise “associate editor”, publishing shorthand for “person who has uses but does not claim any pay.”

Soon, never mind that once again there didn’t seem to be much pay around the place, Don didn’t need any pay. He had done a remarkable thing. He created a paid lecture circuit to plug his radical free-enterprise philosophy.

The convention had been that for journo and academics a bit of speech-making was an honour; you got a free lunch and a presentation tie and considered yourself esteemed. Don, at thirty, somersaulted convention. He promoted himself unabashedly and got companies to pay him – “as much for a half-hour as I got in a month at *Frontline*”, he enjoyed saying – to hear his eulogy to free enterprise. The Speakers Association owes him a statue. (Sadly it will be a statue of a 32-year-old. Don’s car, with hired driver, slipped off a mountain pass on his way to a speech in the Drakensberg.)

The first thing Don did as Associate Editor was much more valuable to me than anything he’d done as Editor. He read my story on the car breaking down and said “run it in the next edition”. I was scandalised. A respectable editor did not publish his own picture. A respectable editor did not announce his own awards. A respectable editor certainly did not inflict readers with what would be 30 pages of his own family’s holiday tale.

Don fought his case with fury, and enlisted NomaV, and then Rachel by long distance, and I became disresponsible.

Don then did an edit job, a thing he did in Olympic class. He’d take my A4 pages, copy them onto the middle of a big A3, and draw lines, in different colours. He needed the colours because he could have 200 observations on the page. One might be a single letter, “parallel” ringed in green with a line to a green “l”; one might be a thousand-word argument on why a line or paragraph should be cut or amplified or changed.

The car story appeared in April 1990. I knew, quietly, that

Frontline was close to breathing its last. Here, now, in dying days, it shattered every response criterion it had known. If an article brought in five meaningful written responses, you'd feel privileged; ten you'd be astonished – the *New Yorker*, the *Spectator*, too, not just little *Frontline*. You didn't get fan-mail like in pop magazines. Until the car story. There were about a hundred letters in first flush, perhaps the same again afterward ...

That would have been a nice sign-off. Poetically, I should have left it there. But I cocked it up. I did a “political” next edition where my politics went monty-python even by my own standards. There were grounds for it: I was anxious that the government would not stand on the white-preference stuff, pushing us back into more attrition. It looked as if they would. So I did an outlandish cover: “What if They Vote for De Klerk?” arguing a residue of rich democracy: If the democracy about to be introduced gave people lots of choice, not just one restate-my-identity vote, plenty of black people would vote for forces that made drains run and taps flow.

Actually, the argument was/is sane enough if you read it properly, but who was going to do that? That cover on its own simply screamed: Crazy.

I think also that cover was influenced by meeting Gerrit Viljoen, the Minister of Constitutional Development.

To him, I put my case that “one man one vote” was the starting-point. He said I was out of order; I was asking the government to give in. “Give in” was a big phrase; the unthinkable alternative to “compromise”. I argued that full-scale democracy was not giving in; when you'd gone beyond “giving in” you got the ingredients for stability.

This was at a discussion group called Synthesis, at the house of Kate and Neil Jowell in Oranjezicht. Viljoen dumped on me a few more times, but muted. Some of my fellow members muttered “stick to the real world” and other familiar phrases. As Viljoen was about to leave he made his way over to me, to the surprise of some of the mutterers, and said, very openly:

“I’ve never seen things this way before”.

That was encouraging, mildly put. I sent him a Fallacy, of course, though I’d already given copies to all three of his full-time think-tankers. I heard no more, which did not surprise me. “Surprise” and “disappoint” are different things.

Meantime white society was catharting itself into an orgy of anti-racism. Chris the barber at Albert Moller’s shop summed it up. “You know”, he said casually while his cut-throat tidied my neck, “I’ve never been a racist”.

That was news. It was Chris who’d wanted to stop stocking cigarettes because they brought blacks into the shop. But now nobody had ever been a racist. Better this way than the opposite, never mind the overswing, and backpatting.

Frontline’s next step towards demise – a lot of journals have died with much bigger thuds, but none with more stages – was the closing of the office. By now it was only me and NomaV, again. We went to *The Star*, and for a while a rump *Frontline* appeared as a quarterly supplement to the *Sunday Star*. That that happened was terrific testimony to the capacity of business to have souls. I’d been unbelievably privileged all the way through this *Frontline* thing, 11 years exactly when it finally expired. The people who worked with it, round it, for it had been fantastic; not just the journos for whom it was a good place to be published, but the many others who’d helped it last a whole decade.

Its death had no fanfare, no bugles. It did have a murderer. I’d killed it, like Pieter said. I’d been killing it since I shifted from enlivening to proselytising, and what a failed proselytisation, too.

Still, at bottom the target had been met. *Frontline*’s *raison d’être* was anti-apartheid. That fight was won. Too bad that it might have been better won; it was a good time to go.

December 1990 the last *Frontline* appeared, a skinny little thing at 32 pages. Nice material, yes, but not lifting my skirt any longer. I didn’t even know, with Tony again displaced,

pursuing a new life in Canada, whether MG Buthelezi would still have made an issue of the “page make-up and layout design generally”.

The next weekend came my private proof of the finality of change. I was invited to speak at Defence College’s year-end.

What a glorious occasion: medals and epaulettes and every regimental colour, the only time that menfolk outshine their women. When I touched on old tensions like how the Navy had booted me out and their civil service cousins had come up with two bannings for advocating universal franchise, the generals were aggrieved: no, no, nothing like that had ever happened.

It was, it is, a new nation. Some other century, some other place, the second course of democracy will get served up, and become a platitude. Meantime, I’m home, content.

AFTERWORD

Aluta Confrikkentinua

WHEN PATRICK LEE DESERTED JOURNALISM TO WRITE MOVIE scripts, I screamed treason. How could he give up, just because he was getting paid three times as much? He had no respect for his movies, even; formula stuff that he described as “ten murders and eleven fucks”. Or maybe it was the other way round. We were playing klabberjas and, between bids, I delivered a sermon on the need to believe in what you were doing. Patrick suffered in silence while the winnings mounted on his side of the table. But then I scored two successive Buits, which is klabberjas language for a whitewash and a thing no klabberjas player can suffer in silence, and when I resumed lecturing, he said, “It hasn’t done much for you, has it?”

That’s an excellent question. He asked it some time in the early nineties, I think, before he went to live in Connecticut. It has stayed with me. Materially speaking, the nineties and the noughties had no lack of ups. I spent a while with my face flighted frequently on a TV show that was much fun to do and

led to a cornucopia of ludicrously lucrative speeches on the conference circuit. (Shameful secret of our time – much more money in saying the same practised thing over and over than in reaching for new things.) More usefully to the world, I also had a fine time as a corporate crap-detector – going into companies, talking to everyone who would talk to me, and composing a picture of where the human dynamics go wrong and why. As I write this afterword in February 2010 I look across my beautiful upstairs deck to the trees of three suburbs and draw my breath, again, at my privilege. My trees are a beauty the like of which is seldom seen. What I have is not a bird’s-eye view but a treetop view. Right in front of me is a gentle decline rising to an eye-level horizon two miles or three kilometres away, and it’s all tree. There’s nothing but tree, no wall, no roof, no pole, no cable, only 10,000 trees, in more shades of green than a colour-chart can dream of. Within them, yes, are hundreds of houses and traffic lights and roads and hoardings, but I can’t see those. I see trees, trees and trees. And birds, thousands of birds.

Outside rest my two cars, one exotic and one spacious, never mind that both ought to have gone for spares years ago. The pool water dances to its cleaner’s beat and the fridge is full. Much of mankind would kill for this. Can I complain?

Yes, I can. Watch me. We’re coming back to it.

But first let me catch up on other things, like Tony.

We’ve both written jokily about the rows we’ve had, but you have to know that some of these rows were no joke. Twice – I think in ’05 and ’06 – Tony produced books of mine that between us, 15,000 kms apart, we delivered unto life with big bad birthmarks, and he blamed me and I blamed him (and lo!, we were both half right) and you don’t want to know the aggro that followed.

Moreover, as you’ve seen, Tony abhors my entire thesis about taking democracy the next notch up: – “pie-in-the-sky middle-class anarchy that doesn’t take any account of human nature”. Generally when people give me that kind of uphill I quietly write them off in my mind as the modern heirs of the British

aristocrats who rampaged about how the coming of democracy in 1832 would mean chaos and mob rule and the triumph of ignorance and the rest (and I hope we both grow old enough for me to hear them gulp and say “oops, sorry”) but for Tony I make a special exemption. Hundreds or thousands of readers have at some time told me that they love or loved *Frontline*, but Tony uniquely put a large amount of his life into expressing that. With pay, yes, most of the time, but even at its best it was never the pay that he'd have seen putting the same effort into the work of regular clients.

So when he insisted that “your writing is a joy to read except when you write about new democracy and turn from Jekyll to Hyde and write convoluted garbage”, he meant it from deep down. It was Pieter le Roux who first said that democracy was killing *Frontline* but it was Tony who said it most often. I've told you, he gets reward from midwifing words worth reading – check out www.coldtype.net for lots of examples. For the fact that his idea of words worth reading includes these words, I give him a real and genuine thank you. It is he who kicked this book into life – twice, with a barn-door pause between. I am glad and grateful that he did, and I'll even tolerate his quaint belief that italics is supposed to be for publications' titles rather than for emphasis in readers' minds.

One other thing to catch up on; Johnny Johnson's appeal. In December 1991 the Chief Justice and two of his brothers in Bloemfontein spoke, and all of them were much, much, rougher on Johnny than Stephen Robinson had come near to. His columns were “... bad, both in style and in content; they trivialise important matters in a manner no doubt intended to be humorous but seldom achieving this ... certain of the writing is in extremely poor taste ... there is throughout the writings a recurring theme of sexual suggestiveness of the crude variety...” The central judgment concluded an extract about Chris Barnard, the heart surgeon, and his new young wife going “nudge, nudge, wink, wink, say no more”, with the words: “No more need be said. The appeal is dismissed with costs.”

Johnny never said a word to me after that. (Not that he'd said one before, beyond that "mmf"). But I have heard it said that the case ruined the remaining 17 years of his life.

For me, my two Appellate Division appearances are stains. My name lives in South African law, once as "loser" and once as "winner", in two perverse cases that should never happened at all. One of them shows that the law can reach legally correct conclusions that the layman rightly brands absurd. The other, even stranger, shows that suing for the light-hearted use of a rough word can bring the rough use of the rough word into play. (Ten years later Stephen told me he'd had a flashback: "I never meant to say 'depraved', the word I was looking for was 'deranged' ".) And both cases show that there's no winner in a libel suit.

I didn't meet Buthelezi again, to talk to, until 2008, when he treated me like a lost son. And he was 80 now, I couldn't prolong any war. Overall, though, while not many of the million cock-ups I have made leave me with a truly sour taste, these two court cases, which weren't strictly my cock-ups, would be welcome to evacuate the mind.

Finally – and now? We're still in South Africa. We're going no place else. Our kids haven't left, even. I love the place, I love the people – quite literally, that phrase means much to me, now. Once it was just the standard cliché; what one said. Now I know better, I know how much boost I get out of day-to-day dealings with the ordinary people of Africa. The best way I can describe it is by that song "A stranger's just a friend you do not know." In my world, my culture, that's a thing a songwriter wrote, it's a thing preachers preach about. But Africa lives it. In ordinary relationship with ordinary real-Africans, you acquire friends all the time. That's real to me. Of course, there are times it sours; times the guy wants to use you, but mostly it's lovely and it's often made doubly lovely by the breathtaking quantities of effort and energy and expertise that your new friend volunteers on your behalf. I become more at home with Africanness, more interested in human beings and very uninterested in caste

and category and “the blacks” and “the whites”. I become more cognisant of the depths of decency so often suffocated by poverty and disarray. All of which is terrifically inspiring for how things could be, will be, when the day comes that we dig our way past the political bullshit.

Which is not today and sure isn't looking like tomorrow. This is a society in such dysfunction that it hurts to think about it. I realised recently, with a shock, that I have known more than a hundred people who have been murdered. That's a statement I do not want the young people coming behind me ever to be able to say. And it goes hand in hand with the daily process of running-down, the constant withering as wheels turn slower, things all the time being run by ever less-trained people in a less-disciplined environment with a rising acceptance of bribes and back-pocket payments.

How do I put these things together – the peculiar human beauty in which Africa quietly specialises and the spectacular organisational failure for which it grows more notorious all the time? Well, I may be wrong but with respect I offer a better answer than the either of the answers that get the air time, the one that says blame Africans for being inferior and the one that says blame whites for distorting the continent. My answer is that democracy as it exists is not big enough for the demands Africa makes. It has been big enough for Sweden, yes. It is patently not big enough for Somalia. Most places fit between and it is going to be places halfway up, middling-stuffed but not broken, that will first get into using Version 2 democracy as their anchor of stability.

Which brings me back to Patrick's question: “It hasn't done much for you, has it?” Yes and no. I've always done pretty much what I believed in, as opposed to what paid best, and for me that is unequivocally the right formula. But then ... the thing I most believe in is exploring and promoting the notion that a better, fairer, squarer, nicer way of living is waiting to be had, accessible by no more than turning the theory that “the people rule” into the reality of the people ruling.

And here I think Patrick might have a point. I left super-democracy grazing in pasture after the 1990 - 1994 turnaround, partly in the spirit that apartheid was over, partly in the belief that the new dispensation would be alright, partly for a rest and some fun. But the new era is not right. The continent is not right. The premier-league democracies, too, have further places to go to. Every signpost for my life says: do something practical and sensible and normal, like real journalism that someone might even pay for. But I get hoist by the belief that the next step up is near, is easy, and will once embraced become immediately as obvious as safety pins or disc brakes.

In two recent books I returned to the theme. The first was a novel, and I hid the message under the novel's plot, where no-one found it. The second was a postscript pulling the message back into light. That had two published reviews, of which one said um okay, sort of sweet, and the other said don't waste your money on this. In a way it is more difficult to state the case now that it's intellectual fashion to disparage democracy. In South Africa in particular, while the glories of it are publicly praised to the skies all the time, lest you be looked at askance, the private judgment of the book-reading, theory-thinking community is that democracy brings pot-holes, broken traffic-lights, corrupt policemen. To want *more* is insane.

Oh dear, here we go again; sermon mode. The ills come not from voters voting for ills, but from voters being confined to an all-but-useless herd-count vote. Certainly in South Africa, not alone, the only antidote to the failings of first-phase democracy is Version 2 democracy. (Overstatement? Try to mention me an alternative.) But where once was freshness, demotivation rules.

Still, I am perpetually re-spurred by watching a beautiful place implode. I reply to Patrick that it does do something for me, to have a truth to cling to at any cost. I wouldn't swap. But I will emit a relieved sigh when it starts running on its own.

Check out www.democracyversiontwo.com, if you'd care to. It should be running by the time this book sees daylight.

Now I just have to work out how to tell Tony the bad news.

While hunting unsuccessfully for pictures I thought he might use on the cover, I came across a mountain of forgotten tales going back to the sixties. If we could do a 1980s book in 2010, nothing wrong with a 1960s one in 2020, right, Tony?

Thanks to you, Reader Who Has Got to the End, I hope we will meet again.

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RADICAL MIDDLE

Chasing peace while apartheid ruled



The fringe of the anti-apartheid industry in the old South Africa was a poor breeding ground for Mr Popularity contestants. The (pale) Afrikaner Nationalist rulers thought you were a tool of the (dark) African Nationalist usurpers and vice versa. Worse, Denis Beckett's *Frontline* magazine was grossly undisciplined. It gave

a hearing to people whom neither Establishment approved of at all; unblushing old-guard racists and unreconstructed Zulu tribalists and even the Black Consciousness gang. A journal like this was not a springboard to wealth and importance, but it lent itself to an unclichééd overview.

Canadian publisher and former *Frontline* designer Tony Sutton twisted Beckett's arm to write the overview. That was in ... um ... the last millennium. Sutton was busy and forgot the book. Beckett was busy and forgot the book. Late in 2009 Sutton was rummaging in long-forgotten computer files – and here is the book, paradoxically turning out to be what the phrase "breath of fresh air" was invented for: fresh perspectives on a fascinating time; fresh thinking on the care and maintenance of troubled countries; fresh evidence that tilting at windmills remains a pastime of distinction

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