



AVE: R 23873.46

# Tony Leon — the unlikely diplomat

Combative and outspoken but on the job for SA, says **TJ Strydom**

**H**E met the pope before the pope was even the pope. Tony Leon drops names — quite a few of them world-famous ones — during our interview. They are all in one way or another related to his stint as South Africa’s highest-ranking diplomat in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay.

While he was in office, 11 South African ministers came calling. Former president FW de Klerk popped in. Even rugby legend Joost van der Westhuizen was his guest when he promoted the new format that would broaden Tri-Nations rugby to include Argentina’s Pumas.

About the expanded rugby tournament, Leon said: “It was all because I was there.” He pauses, then smiles: “Just joking!”

On a more serious note, he said “We really did a lot to get that tournament started.”

Humble or not, Leon is engaging. He talks to you. He puts himself in the middle of important events. He tells a good story. (My colleague who took the photo of Leon quips on the way back to the office: “It’s like he’s the Forrest Gump of politics — whenever something happened, he was there.”)

Leon, a former leader of the DA and its precursor, is on a book tour promoting *The Accidental Ambassador — From Parliament to Patagonia*, his account of the three years he spent in Buenos Aires.

As we sit in a Sandton restaurant shortly before a radio interview, he recalls official events and unofficial trips to places as exotic as the Galapagos Islands.

He opens his copy of the book often, flipping through the pages, reading a passage or two, and then continuing with the story.

“I believed it would be perfectly possible, even appropriate, to advance South Africa’s interests without becoming a mealy-mouthed sell-out of everything I had stood for during my political career,” he says in *The Accidental Ambassador*.

Leon says something similar when asked how he could join a



ACCIDENTAL AMBASSADOR Tony Leon

Picture: LAUREN MULLIGAN

government he opposed. He distinguishes between “joining” the ANC and “serving” the country.

He accepted President Jacob Zuma’s offer to become an ambassador, he contends, to put himself in South Africa’s service.

Too many embassies, Leon says, are “cost centres” instead of “income centres”, outposts that boost trade, investment and tourism.

Embassies can easily pay for themselves by bringing in much more than they cost. When Leon left

for Buenos Aires, the trade balance was very much skewed in the Latin American country’s favour. South Africa imported 10 times more from Argentina than it exported to there.

During Leon’s tenure, trade grew by 80%, he said.

But it is not only about rands and pesos.

Being an ambassador is about building relationships, establishing a network of contacts and sending our minister of international relations and cooperation more

information than she can get “on CNN”.

These tasks, he is adamant, he performed well.

And he met Mario Jose Bergoglio, then Cardinal Archbishop of Buenos Aires, now Pope Francis I.

In the book Leon refers to the quick meeting and to Bergoglio’s criticism of the politics of the feisty Argentinian president, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner.

The president — “whose botox makes [DA leader] Helen [Zille’s] look unimaginative” — would not set foot in the same place as Bergoglio, and flew Leon and a host of ambassadors “to hell and gone” for an alternative independence celebration to avoid the service in the cardinal’s cathedral.

“I didn’t know at the time of writing that the guy would be the pope now.”

That, he says, is Argentina. A vast place of natural endowment and “endless human capital” — he lists the pope, Lionel Messi and others — but tragically in the clutches of bad policy.

“My wife, Michal, says it’s like India but with 1.1 billion fewer people.”

Leon wrote the book to give South Africans a look at diplomatic life.

“It is meant to be accessible,” he told me.

And it is full of quirky bits, like his account of coping with a steep language-learning curve.

In 2010 Leon greeted 250 prominent Argentinians aboard the South African Navy supply ship *Drakensberg*, saying in Spanish: “Good evening and welcome, ladies and horses.”

Undeterred, he continued to try to deliver at least part of each of his public speeches in Spanish.

Leon is now retired and living in Cape Town.

His life, he laughs, is at the moment “like the foreign policy of South Africa: a bit of this ... a bit of that”.

Leon is on the lecture circuit. He writes a column for a newspaper. And he is involved with a private equity group that is to make an announcement soon.

During the interview he drops the biggest name in the business.

“In 1994 when I had my first meeting with Madiba — I had many meetings with him — I suggested that he appoint Zach de Beer, my predecessor as leader of the then Democratic Party, [as] an ambassador.”

It came full circle a decade- and- a half later when Leon packed his bags for Buenos Aires.