



Yes, he was diplomatic

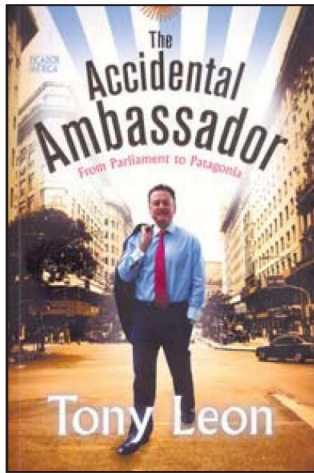
Tony Leon is a good writer. Good enough to command a regular column in *Business Day*, whose editor, Peter Bruce, remarked at the book launch last week that Leon sustains his standard without applying the journalistic rule that adjectives should be avoided.

The Accidental Ambassador is full of adjectives. Yet it is captivating because Leon is an astute, well-informed observer who enjoys entertaining. He does his homework, so his observations are interspersed with interesting information gleaned from research.

Leon did not set out to be an ambassador. The job came about after he balked at Jacob Zuma's request for him to serve on the Human Rights Commission. Having recently visited his friend Douglas Gibson, then ambassador to Thailand, Leon hinted that he too would like a diplomatic post. And so it came to pass ...

Patagonia doesn't loom large in the book but makes for a catchy subtitle. He paid a brief visit to the Boers at the end of the world, in southeast Argentina. About 800 SA families settled there in the early 20th century, to escape British rule. Although Afrikaans surnames abound, the bearers are Spanish speaking. That's where Leon met a Van der Merwe who could not speak Afrikaans or English.

During his three years as our representative in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay he was busy. He ramped up



BOOK REVIEW BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

the embassy's activity level, boosting trade, cultural and sporting ties. In September 2009, bequeathed an "exceptionally modest list of contacts", he set about remedying this, inspired by the words of his friend, businessman Philip Krawitz: "Your net worth is your network, and vice versa."

Having witnessed him in action in Mendoza, when the Pumas made their entry into the Rugby Championship, I attest to his frenetic social pace. He also found time to appreciate natural wonders such as Iguassu Falls, where

The Mission was filmed, and the Galapagos Islands off Ecuador.

Those who think of Leon as an abrasive "fight-back" opposition leader question his diplomatic skills. He is in fact charming, and savvy enough to know when to hold back. In the book he admits to one *faux pas*. Hosting a dinner where guests included the British ambassador, he upset a guest by asking: "What is it about the Malvinas that makes all Argentines so agitated? After all, you wouldn't go and live in that windswept archipelago?"

That touches a raw nerve in the land of the gaucho and Evita, which bristles at British rule of what Margaret Thatcher called the Falklands.

Politics is Leon's game, so there are sharp comments about the powers that be in Argentina and SA. He draws comparisons and finds our discourse mild in relation to that of the Peronists, whose venality may surpass that of our rulers.

Can a former leader of the opposition be a good ambassador? Leon thinks he did so by representing the country, not the ruling party. He did not have to compromise his principles. And in cables to head office he was not shy to point out where SA fell short of Nelson Mandela's pledge that human rights would guide foreign policy. That may have led to the speedy acceptance when he said he'd like to come home a year early.

The Accidental Ambassador is a worthy successor to *On the Contrary*.