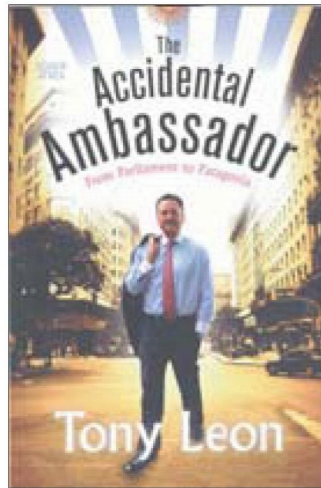




How Tony Leon was thrown into the deep end as an ambassador



THE ACCIDENTAL AMBASSADOR

Tony Leon
Picador

REVIEW: Shaun Swingler

TONY Leon is a very candid man. In a South African literary landscape that's littered with carefully worded political biographies, his second autobiography – *The Accidental Ambassador* – is anything but diplomatic.

Honest, outspoken and sometimes scathing, the book follows Leon's retirement from

political life as leader of the opposition in Parliament in 2009 and his move into public service as South African ambassador to Argentina.

On leaving the DA in 2009, Leon experienced what he described as the existential "and now what?" question. At the age of 52, he was too young to retire, but felt his political life in SA had reached the end of its course.

After a discussion with President Jacob Zuma, in which Leon hinted he would like a diplomatic post, it was decided: he was to become the South African ambassador

extraordinary and plenipotentiary to Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay. In this book, Leon details the build-up to his diplomatic mission and his three-week crash course on how to be an ambassador (diplomatic training under normal circumstances, Leon claims, should last at least four months).

The poor preparation given to him left him with little knowledge of what lay in store. His admission that even after entering Argentina and still not being entirely sure of what his job required was a telling indication of how the slow wheels

of bureaucracy would shape his diplomatic experiences abroad. Leon would be wandering around in the dark, but determined not to be one of the "disguised unemployed" that he argues many ambassadors are inclined to become.

The job would be yet another example of a life lived as an "outsider-insider" as he describes it. This began as one of a handful of Jewish boys educated at a Methodist boarding school in KwaZulu-Natal, the English leader of a predominantly Afrikaans-supported party, a "white politician" in an essen-

tially black Parliament, and finally as a South African ambassador; "representing a government I had resolutely opposed".

He notes that on accepting his new diplomatic role, many had warned him not to view his new country through the lens of his home country, but he concedes this was not possible as the similarities were uncanny.

The book serves as a frank examination of the often startling parallels between two countries in transition. The tensions apparent in Argentina seem closely related to those faced in South Africa.

Argentina's conflict with its colonial roots, exemplified by the fight over the Falklands/Malvinas with Britain, is one such example. A touchy subject, which Leon admits to accidentally agitating at a dinner party at his Buenos Aires residence one night where, seated among a British ambassador and many Argentines, Leon quipped "what is it about the Malvinas (Falklands) that makes Argentines so agitated? After all, you wouldn't go and live in that windswept archipelago?"

Leon faced tough opposition in his attempts to make an

impact while ambassador. One of his mandates was to promote trade in economically eccentric Argentina, a country which is notoriously import-averse.

The Accidental Ambassador takes a detail-rich view of his experiences in Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, peppering his anecdotes with interesting historical and contemporary context. Although disparaging of the state of international diplomacy and increasingly jaded and disillusioned by South African foreign policy, Leon's observations are intelligent, engaging and incredibly funny.