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Don't cry for me, Argentina

Since his return to SA, Tony Leon has written a book looking back on his time as ambassador in the 'Paris of the South'. STEPHEN COAN spoke to him

ANYONE who has visited Argentina, especially its capital, Buenos Aires, will likely agree with Tony Leon that it is a place where "magic realism is reality".

Dubbed the "Paris of the South", this bustling city sports a sophisticated façade, reflected in the wide boulevards of the city centre, but edge beyond the sound of the tango and the smell of coffee, and you find a disconcerting blend of rich and poor: dilapidated buildings, broken pavements, and ubiquitous reminders of the country's chequered past, not least in the kaleidoscope of races and cultures walking the streets—from the indigenous Indians, decimated by the Spanish conquerors, to the immigrants of the 20th century.

Leon, former leader of the opposition and head of the Democratic Alliance, enjoyed a deep immersion in the beguiling melting pot of Buenos Aires, thanks to serving three years as the South African ambassador and plenipotentiary to Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, now chronicled in his book *The Accidental Ambassador*.

To explain the country's racial jigsaw, Leon quotes its most famous writer, Jorge Luis Borges, who described Argentina as "an imported country — everyone here is really from somewhere else".

The first half of the 20th century saw a huge immigration of people from Europe — English, Irish, French, East Europeans and a large proportion of Italians — who all became part of a boom economy, largely based on beef. An "emigrant mélange" that is acknowledged in the national joke: an Argentine is an Italian who speaks Spanish, acts like a Frenchman, but secretly wishes he were English.

"There is no escaping the country's half-baked identity," says Leon, "thanks in part to its mainly imported population. And it's still not come to terms with that."

Nor has Argentina comes to terms with its violent past, especially the Dirty War of 1976 to 1983, when a military junta stepped in after a series of quasi dictators — including the Perons — had plunged the country into chaos. This was the time of "the disappeared", a time of torture, state-sponsored killings and murder — "9 000 was the verified figure, but some estimates suggest nearly 30 000," says Leon. "It was apartheid on an industrial scale."

The truth of much of what happened has never come out. "They never had a Truth and Reconciliation Commission or its equivalent," says Leon. "I'm not saying that everything came out via the TRC, but we made a much better fist of it than the Argentinians."

One of the problems of not having had some sort of TRC process is that nothing was officially disclosed, says Leon. "So when anyone of note from that period comes into high office, the question is 'What did you do in the war?'" says Leon.

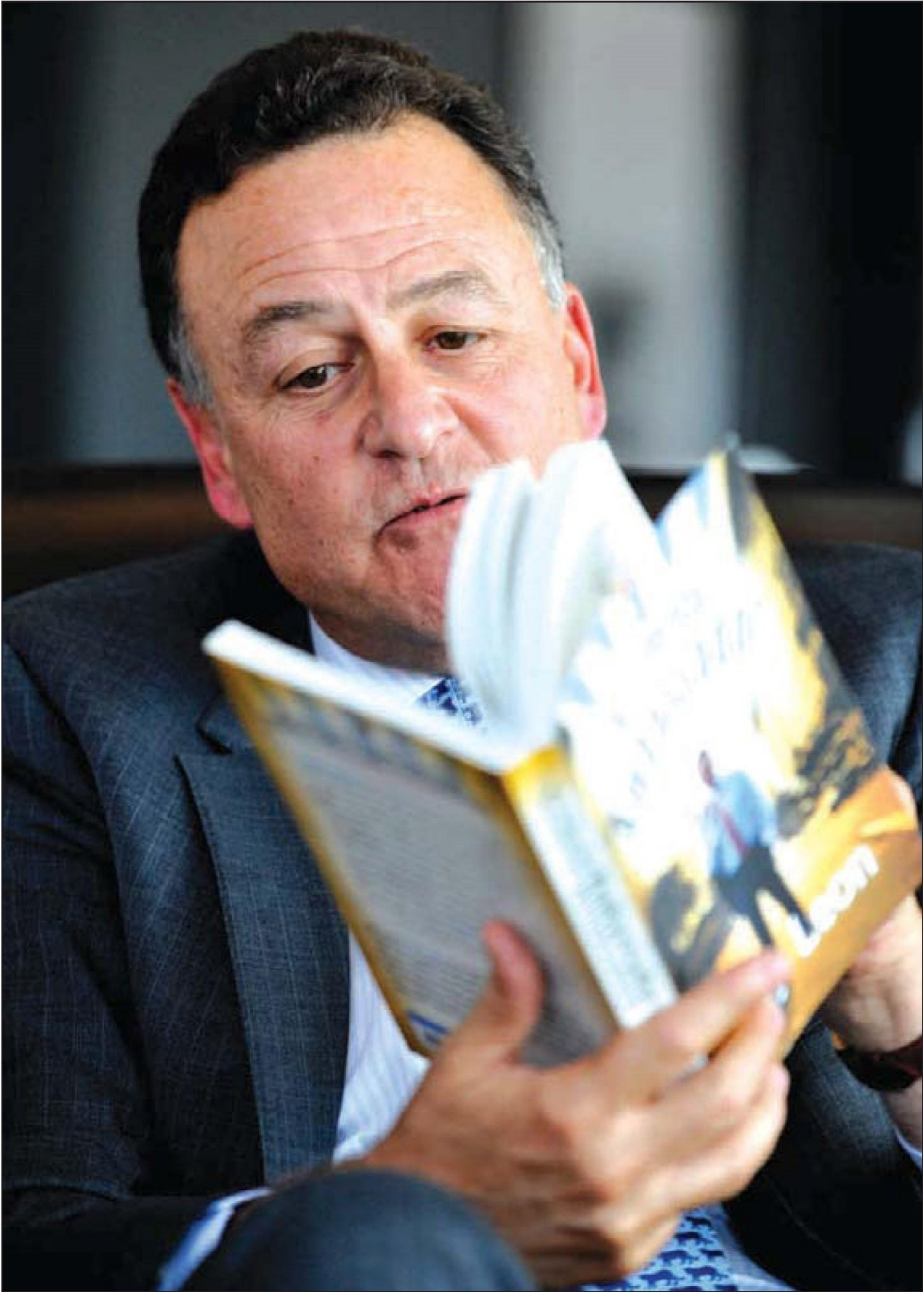
As it was with Pope Francis, who, until his election as pope earlier this year, Leon had known as the Argentine Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio. "He is a very good man, but there are questions hanging over him."

In 2011, thanks to Bergoglio's outspoken criticism of Cristina Kirchner's current government, Leon found himself and other diplomats flown to the city of Resistencia in the far northern province of Chaco, to listen to Kirchner's address marking the 201st anniversary of the Day of the Revolution, after having earlier visited the city's cathedral for a religious service.

"It was all because Cristina wouldn't cross the road from the Pink House [the seat of government] to Bergoglio's cathedral across the square," says Leon.

"She hated Bergoglio because of what he said. When he became pope, she flew to Rome to bend the knee, but back home she wouldn't cross the road."

One topic that will get Argentines to cross the road together is the Falklands, or the



Tony Leon is back in South Africa with a new book under his belt.

PHOTO: HERMAN VERWEY CITY PRESS

Malvinas as they are known in Argentina. "It's something that all Argentines cross the divide and unite around," says Leon, as he found to his cost when hosting a dinner for his Argentine friends and jocularly asked one of them: "What is it about Malvinas that makes all Argentines so agitated? After all, you wouldn't want to go and live on that windswept archipelago?"

The fiery response saw Leon thereafter determinedly maintain the recommended South African policy of "strenuous neutrality" on the subject. At least he didn't add Borges' famous comment on the 1982 war between Argentina and Britain as a "fight

between two bald men over a comb".

Leaving aside the legacies of the past and questions of identity, the big question is how Argentina went from boom to bust so quickly. "I was reading an essay by Marios Llosas Vargas last night, in which he is appalled by Argentina," says Leon. "Here was a country ahead of its time, that had a functioning democracy before Europe. Now it has an economy a quarter that of Brazil and it's heading off a cliff."

Leon was especially chuffed at having read the essay in the original Spanish, a language, as he admits in the book, he battles with, as on the occasion he risked speaking

it to welcome 250 Argentine guests visiting the South African ship Drakensberg: "Good evening and welcome, ladies and horses" — substituting the word *caballos* (horses) for the word *caballeros* (gentlemen).

As is evident from such stories, *The Accidental Ambassador* is an entertaining account of Leon's three years as ambassador, in a posting that saw the poacher turn gamekeeper, "representing a government I had resolutely opposed". One senses it's a paradox he never quite resolved.

When an ambassadorship was first mooted, Leon decided he would only accept a posting where he would not have to pro-

mote policies he did not agree with. "Argentina was a comfortable fit," he says. "There were no issues to contend with. It would have been a different matter if it had been Tel Aviv or Harare."

Ironically, it was probably South African foreign policy that played a role in shortening his stay from four years to three.

"On the other hand, I didn't want to watch the clock," he says. "Also, my wife couldn't work, I have an ageing father in Durban, and I felt I had done what I set out to do."

What did he set out to do? Boost trade between the two countries. "There was an 80% improvement while I was there," he says. Quite an achievement in a country that imports as little as possible.

"I looked for niches," Leon says. "Argentina is the most protectionist country in the world; there are no foreign goods. But the pampas came to our rescue. Argentina is one of the most fertile countries in the world." And the boom in soybean production meant there was a need for fertiliser. "We had something they wanted."

But when Leon spoke out on foreign policy — on Syria, Libya and the refusal of the Dalai Lama's visa — there was a change of attitude towards him back in Pretoria. "Whenever I spoke on the phone to them, it was no longer 'Hello Tony, how are you?' but 'Hello Tony, when are you coming back?' I waited until the Springboks came, then I left."

In 2012, the Springboks played in the Rugby Championship, the former tri-nations with Argentina on board, a satisfying coda to the Argentine premiere of the film *Invictus*, hosted by the South African embassy shortly after Leon's arrival in 2009.

Living far from South Africa, Leon was able to view events here more dispassionately than he would have in the past.

"But I would still see things and gasp and gulp. But then, looking at Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay, I'd realise we had still got a lot of things right."

Now Leon is back, writing a regular column for *Business Day*, consulting to potential trade partners and busy on "the paid lecture circuit, as opposed to the unpaid lecture circuit I was on as a politician".

Is he having any second thoughts on his political career, his style of confrontational politics for example? "Compared to what's happening now, I think I was rather an amateur. Now it's like two parties are going through a really bad divorce."

Leon's past outspokenness on corruption and growing authoritarianism now looks prophetic. "I realised what we were up against when the sainted [Nelson] Mandela made a speech written by [Thabo] Mbeki, in which he said the opposition is destroying our society."

"Back then, there was a strange acquiescence. Perhaps people thought they should give the benefit of the doubt, but I don't apologise for what I said."

Writing about South Africa in the present, Leon notes the gulf between "the fine prospectus for a better South Africa, offered by the National Planning Commission, and the dismal events at Marikana". For Leon, crossing that gulf safely and timously "remains the essential challenge for the future".

As far as Leon is concerned, the jury is still out on the National Development Plan. "We need a Thatcherite determination to take on the unions in this country," he says, "to get them on board the NDP because they seem to have declared war on it."

But is the government itself on board? "[Jacob] Zuma told me that the NDP is front and centre of everything the government does—but he has to make it happen. We need to see it. In deeds, not words."

• **The Accidental Ambassador — From Parliament to Patagonia by Tony Leon is published by Picador Africa.**
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