



THE AMBASSADOR COMES HOME

Former opposition leader Tony Leon is back in Cape Town after three colourful years representing South Africa in Buenos Aires

By ALMARI WESSELS Pictures: CORRIE HANSEN

THE “Chihuahua” is back! But the ANC no longer has to worry about being bitten by him from the opposition benches of parliament because “not being an ambassador, not being a politician, I’m liberated”, Tony Leon says.

Three-and-a-half years after President Jacob Zuma offered him a diplomatic job over tea and biscuits, the straight-talking former leader of the Democratic Alliance (DA) and former ambassador to Argentina, Paraguay and Uruguay has once again taken up residence in Cape Town.

In addition he’s published another book, his third, about his time in South America – in his experience home to a handful of Spanish-speaking Van der Merwes, among others.

But Tony (56) hasn’t lost his air of statesmanship – he’s stylishly dressed, charming and chatty. His home is almost painfully neat and filled with mementos from his long and eventful political career. On a cabinet is a picture of him and his Israeli wife, Michal Even-Zahav, with the Dalai Lama.

“We returned from Argentina in November and restored the house,” he says. They’ve now settled in Cape Town.

For the interview he’s wearing a light-blue sweater and later changes into a black jacket to look more formal for the photoshoot.

When Zuma offered him the ambassadorial post in 2009 he disagreed with many aspects of the government’s foreign policy, he recalls, among them the reluctance to grant the Dalai Lama an entry visa and its position on Libya and Syria. But he believes you don’t have to belong to the ANC to do

something important for South Africa.

“A week before we left I met with President Zuma at Genadendal [the president’s official residence in Cape Town],” Tony says. “He said it was important some of the [SA] faces abroad weren’t just ANC faces.”

But he acknowledges his job was made easier by the absence of friction between SA and the South American countries.

“It would have been another story if they’d sent me to Russia or Israel.”

HE HAS news for those who talk about “Africa time” when discussing punctuality and work ethics in South Africa. “They’ve obviously never been to Argentina,” he says.

“If you’re invited to dinner at someone’s house for 8 pm you need to know that’s the time you should leave your house. Once we

arrived at a dinner at 8 pm. The hosts were still in the shower upstairs and the guests drifted in an hour and a half later."

The rugby-mad Argentinians with their stifling bureaucracy nonetheless found a way to Tony's heart – through his stomach. He loves *asado*, their version of a braai.

"They don't braai like we do in SA – a few chops and chicken or boerewors. It's a complete ritual with lots of different, fantastic sorts of meat. It can continue for hours."

He acknowledges he can neither tango nor speak Spanish fluently. "To try to learn a new language from scratch at my age was extremely difficult."

After a slip of the tongue at an official function aboard the SA Navy ship SAS Drakensberg he decided in future to stick strictly to the prepared text if he had to deliver an address in Spanish. He recalls how he unintentionally left an "r" out of a Spanish word – which meant he welcomed 200 Argentinian guests as "ladies and horses".

Tony speaks warmly of the diplomatic team he worked with at the embassy in Buenos Aires, but was particularly shocked to discover how many South Africans were arrested in Argentina for drug smuggling – 50 during his term of office.

"Most of them were trying to smuggle cocaine and three of them died after swallowing liquid cocaine."

He met Spanish-speaking Van der Merwes (who spoke no Afrikaans) during a trip he decided to make to a desolate part of Patagonia to find the descendants of some 800 Boer fighters who'd moved to Argentina after the Anglo-Boer War.

"I don't think head office had this in mind," he says, "but I must be the only ambassador in the entire world to have interacted with a boer community in Patagonia."

He recalls the experience in his book *The Accidental Ambassador: From Parliament to Patagonia*. The book also tells stories about some Argentinian and SA officials – such as Tokyo Sexwale, SA's billionaire minister of human settlements, who apparently paid \$1 200 (about R10 000) for a steak meal at one of Buenos Aires' top restaurants.

Back home he ignored the controversy over the dropping of references to him in a speech by Helen Zille, his successor as leader of the DA, on the history of the party.

"I'm completely relaxed about that. I understand it as Helen explained it to me – the DA want to emphasise the [struggle] part [of its history]." But he doesn't believe in arguing over the past. It's an important lesson he learnt in Argentina, he says.

"In 1930 Argentina was one of the 10

richest countries in the world. Today it has a smaller economy than South Africa's and it's going down fast." The reason is simple, he says: "They're obsessed with the past – and it's holding them back."

"I started as a politician under FW de Klerk and ended under Jacob Zuma. I've experienced several presidents and I'm only 56!"

What does he think of Cyril Ramaphosa's return to active politics as deputy president of the ANC and his possible effect on the ruling party?

"Cyril is a first-class negotiator – he knows what he wants and he gets it," Tony observes. "He has been quiet until now but he has all the necessary skills and definitely shouldn't be underestimated."

What SA needs, Tony says, is someone with a plan for the future and for a society with people who have skills to do their jobs properly – and are held responsible for it.

HE WAS a bachelor for many years and one of SA's most eligible politicians before he and Michal got together. "I'm not here to prescribe; everyone needs to follow the beat of their own drum," he says. "I was 42 when I got married. I think I was a very different person than when I was 25."

As a younger man "I was so obsessively, singularly focused on building my party that I couldn't commit to the levels you need to sustain a relationship".

And without the support of Michal, a life coach to executives and business leaders, his job as ambassador would have been harder.

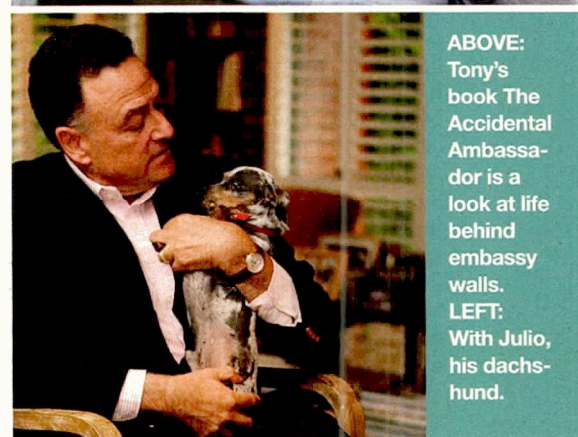
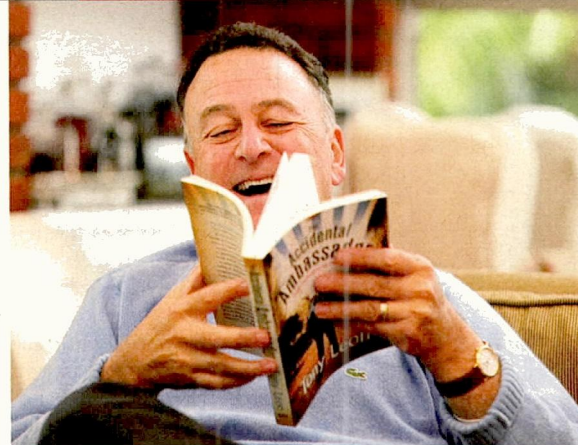
How is he handling being stepfather to Michal's sons, Noa (26) and Etai (25)?

"I'm way too nice – that's why they'll probably never leave home," he jokes. "I told them they have to leave at 40 – that's the new benchmark."

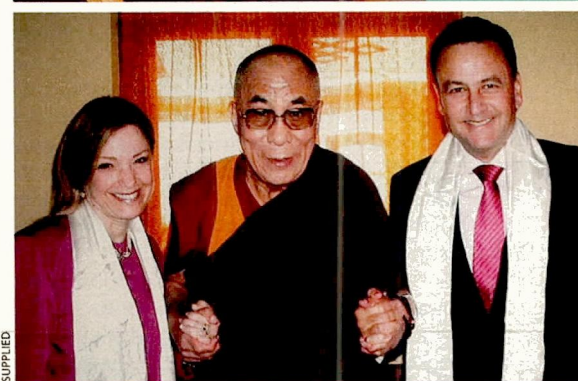
After his diplomatic experience Tony says his sights are now set on "a bit of this and a bit of that". He delivers lectures in SA and elsewhere in the world, writes a column for *Business Day* newspaper and is in negotiations to set up a PR company.

His 88-year-old father, Raymond, lives in Durban and was apparently ecstatic to be given a copy of Tony's new book. "I just wish my mom, Sheila, was still around," Tony says wistfully. "She always supported me and would have been so proud."

"But as my friend Douglas Gibson [former DA chief whip and ambassador to Thailand] said, 'Tony, your mom would have said that the ambassadorship is nothing less than what you deserved'." ■



ABOVE: Tony's book *The Accidental Ambassador* is a look at life behind embassy walls. LEFT: With Julio, his dachshund.



Tony and his wife, Michal Even-Zahav, flank the Dalai Lama. BELOW: The couple with Joost van der Westhuizen. Tony became friends with the former Bok during Joost's rugby-promoting visits to South America.

