



Ambassadorial post in Argentina has turned ‘jaded cynic’ into a marketer of the country, watching politics from afar, writes Sam Mkokeli

# Former opposition leader Leon reborn as a cheerleader for SA

TONY Leon, former leader of the Democratic Alliance (DA), has undergone a mind-set shift, having moved from a “jaded cynic” shouting at the government from Parliament’s opposition benches to a marketer of SA during his time as SA’s ambassador in Argentina.

He is even laid-back about my being 10 minutes late for our breakfast appointment in Johannesburg last week. He brushes off my traffic gridlock excuse with: “Anyone who complains about African time has not lived in Argentina.”

He wastes no time, getting into what fascinates him about the colourful developments of South African politics, from the DA to Agang.

Watching political developments from a distance is what he does, and he finds it completely different to when he was in Parliament.

After leaving his position as leader of the DA, Mr Leon was offered a foreign posting by President Jacob Zuma in 2010, which he grabbed with both hands. This, he says, provided him with invaluable experience and insights, which he shares in his book — The Accidental Ambassador.

“The best thing about the ambassadorial experience is to actually leave the water’s edge of SA, and actually be able to go to an environment to sell SA, without having to sell the DA or the ANC (African National Congress).”

His selection for the post seemed

to have come out of a cordial relationship with Mr Zuma. The warm relationship between the two is the exact opposite of the relationship Mr Leon had with Mr Zuma’s predecessor, Thabo Mbeki.

During the Mbeki presidency, from 1999-2008, the tension between them was visible in Parliament. “He didn’t like opposition,” he says of Mr Mbeki, whom he regarded as a “very intelligent and able man” until he became the country’s first citizen.

He says Mr Mbeki was a fine deputy president to Nelson Mandela from 1994-1999, but something seemed to have gone wrong when he became the president, when he appeared to have undergone a “personality change”.

“Instead of bringing his considerable strengths when he was number two ... he sort of cut them (the skills) off and became something else.

“I don’t know which was the real Thabo. I am not a psychologist or an expert, I just think had he brought what he had always shown to me and to others until 1999 ... he would have been a fantastically effective president. Instead, he wasn’t. Eventually he was removed precisely because the very strengths he showed when he was deputy president weren’t in evidence when he was president.”

Mr Mbeki’s presidency is in line with Mr Leon’s “home-baked theory” — that deputies who do well as understudies do not do well when they get the top job.

“Some people are brilliant and at ease and relaxed about being number two, and then they get to number one, and they somehow find it too burdensome. He (Mbeki) is not alone — look at Gordon Brown. He was a brilliantly effective chancellor; he was sort of co-strapped as the New Labour with Tony Blair. He becomes prime minister ... he becomes the least successful prime minister. He was bundled out of

office within two to three years. John Major, after Ms (Margaret) Thatcher — same kind of phenomenon! He was very good as number two ... he (got to) the top post, he was not billed for prime time, sometimes I think that happens,” Mr Leon says.

But he refrains from testing his theory on Mr Zuma — how he fared as a deputy, and how he’s doing as number one. “We can’t write the final version because he is still in office,” he says. But he appreciates Mr Zuma’s honesty in his leadership approach. “He never changed,” he says.

“I am not his defender — I am well aware of the flaws of his presidency as well as some of the attributes. Zuma was never pretentious. He never said I would be this, and he hasn’t proven to be that,” he says.

“The reason that made him attractive to so many people when he was number two is he was connected, warm, empathetic, he could understand. He was anti-intellectual, he was everything that Mbeki wasn’t. He hasn’t changed since he became president. I’m living proof of that. I went to see him in November when I got back (from Argentina), I rolled up, he gave me a big hug, and said welcome back to SA. You feel that. I think a lot of that is genuine.”

But Mr Leon sees the other side of the Zuma presidency, too. “There is a lot of stuff which is less reassuring, which is very well known.”

One of his gripes is Mr Zuma’s self-stated leadership style. “Zuma said I am a collectivist, he didn’t say I will give leadership from the front.”

“The most disturbing thing about Jacob Zuma — he said this in Washington ... in a public forum — ‘I represent the collective of the ANC — where the ANC tells me to go, I will go,’” Mr Leon says.

Since his return to SA, Mr Leon has been advising companies about doing business in Argentina, giving talks, marketing his book, and writing a weekly column for Business Day. But he has been drawn to the DA’s controversies, although he is not an active leader of the party.

The party omitted his name in the list of people who fought against apartheid, in its “Know Your DA”

campaign — which tracks the party’s history of opposing apartheid.

He tries to stay away from the controversies, but he can’t help himself. He says he does not amplify the role of the Democratic Party (DP) — the precursor to the DA.

“The DP was in its modest way anti-apartheid, pro-constitutional negotiations, but I can’t proclaim it to be more than that,” he says.

He feels the DA needs to be smart in charting new waters in the build-up to next year’s elections. “There’s a lot at stake because the DA has now got no more room to grow among the minorities. All the low-hanging fruit has been plucked by the party. To grow, it’s got to really break through into some numbers, not just modestly, among black voters.”

But the path to the black vote is packed with obstacles. “And the question is, is that going to happen? Or is Agang going to be the kind of vehicle that will suddenly park in its driveway?” he asks rhetorically.

Mr Leon is comfortable with the legacy he left in the DA despite having run the much-criticised “fight back” campaign during the 1999 elections.

“I’m very amused when people say ‘Tony is very confrontational’. Well, hold on, the last DA campaign, I seem to recall the slogan was ‘Stop Zuma’. I never had a campaign called ‘Stop Mbeki’. I just said fight back against crime, corruption.”

He is steadfast in defending what he achieved.

“The beneficiaries of the fight back campaign are the very people sitting in government in the Western Cape. If the DP hadn’t made a breakthrough in that 1999 election, I am not sure we would be having this conversation today, with me as a former leader of the opposition. I might have been a leader of a party which has long since disappeared and I disappeared with it.”

As for the DA? It needs a new, clear buzz. “The DA’s real job is to provide a compelling alternative — not to get involved in ANC lite. ANC lite is like Coke and Pepsi. You want actually to be a Fanta, you want to be something different.”

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NEW LIFE: Since his return to SA, Tony Leon has been advising companies about doing business in Argentina. Picture: TREVOR SAMSON