



## FMLIFE

### BOOK OF THE WEEK

# Our man on the Pampas

**Not many of our ambassadors** — who live abroad in varying degrees of luxury at your and my expense — have felt it necessary to report back with frankness about their experiences in the foreign service.

But Tony Leon is, or was, not your run-of-the-mill emissary. Casting around for a new role after 20 years in politics, the former DA leader was invited, or rather invited himself, to become a diplomat. Argentina, to which he chose to go in preference to Portugal, is not among SA's most significant diplomatic outposts, but it's a member of the G20 and a key partner in our so-called "South-South" diplomacy. Yet the author only felt comfortable going to a second-string embassy, he explains, because it would enable him to advance SA's interests without having to defend policies he had spent much of his political life opposing. This "no-conflict-of-conscience" approach served well enough until the Arab Spring erupted, when he found himself in difficulty trying to explain the Zuma government's contortions over its policy towards Libya and Syria.

Argentina, as described in *The Accidental Ambassador*, is quite similar to SA in population numbers, economic size and levels of inequality, crime and corruption. Once one of the world's richest countries, with an economy four times the size of Brazil's, it has spent the past 100 years mired in political unrest, military dictatorship and economic mismanagement which have left it trailing well behind Brazil, now the powerhouse

of South America.

As in SA, political opposition to the elected government comes from the trade unions, grown powerful from six decades of cossetting at the hands of Juan and Evita Peron and their populist successors. The current president, Cristina Kirchner, widow of past president Nestor Kirchner, stays in office by subsidising everything from transport to cigarettes and raiding the public purse (from private pension funds to bank deposits) in order to hike public servants' wages and old-age pensions.

Dismissive of the institutions of democratic government, such as the courts, media and central bank, the Kirchners have effectively privatised state power by

### THE ACCIDENTAL AMBASSADOR – FROM PARLIAMENT TO PATAGONIA

By Tony Leon  
281 pages  
Picador Africa  
R220

fusing personal and state interests in the hands of their inner circle. Business deals are approved at the highest level and political connectivity is the path to riches in their Argentina. Little wonder that SA diplomats there feel at home.

By his own account, Leon was a pretty effective ambassador, raising our exports to Argentina by 80% to R1,3bn within two years. He was assisted by a following wind from SA's successful hosting of the 2010 Fifa World Cup, in which the three countries to which he was accredited (Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay) all made it through to the final stages. Rugby ties helped too: one of his last official func-

tions in 2012 was to welcome the Pumas to an expanded annual four-nations rugby tournament. Sports personalities from Lucas Radebe to Joost van der Westhuizen and many football, rugby and hockey teams also aided him in flying the flag in remote parts of the country, far away from overpopulated Buenos Aires.

The author reflects, amusingly, on his uneasy relationship with the minister of international relations and her mandarins, who were never keen on accepting the advice of those in the field. His sensible advice at a heads of mission meeting that, in order to conserve resources, many costly diplomatic outposts should be closed in favour of a core of bigger missions in key centres on each continent was met with "a stony silence". Too many vested interests and cosy careers are at stake, it seems.

Not one who wears his erudition lightly, Leon writes entertainingly and well. Replete with anecdote, economic insight and shrewd political analysis, *The Accidental Ambassador* has much to commend it and should (but won't) be prescribed reading throughout the diplomatic service. **Richard Steyn**

