



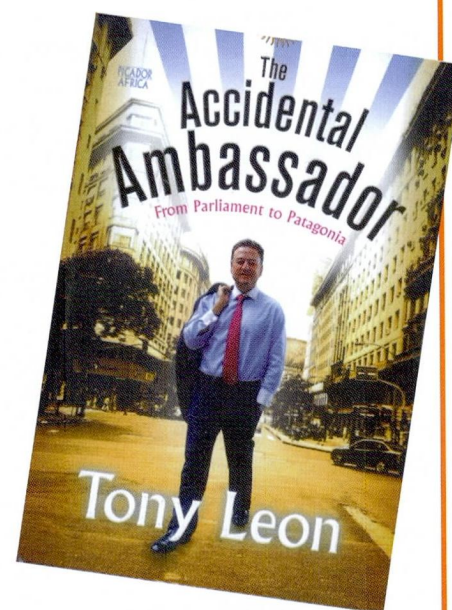
Lifestylebooks

Not His Master's Voice

DAVID GLEASON

The Accidental Ambassador
by Tony Leon

Picador Africa, 281pp, R226



This is a much cleverer book than seems at first to be the case. When I picked it up I half-expected a series of excellently related witticisms reflecting the experiences of a novel diplomat abroad and the book is certainly littered with these, well related and with the deftest of touches of whimsy.

But there is a great deal more to it. Here is the former leader of a vibrant political opposition party learning a craft for which I would argue he is distinctly unsuited, yet bringing to it a panache and gentility that has an old world quality about it.

As Henry Wotton once remarked, an ambassador is an honest man sent abroad to lie and intrigue for the benefit of his country. Diplomacy has changed form, shape and substance down the centuries. In its earlier manifestations an ambassador was the voice, eyes and ears in another country of a single master, usually a king or emperor. The implication of this is that the ambassador was an individual in whom his leader reposed the utmost trust. That can hardly any longer be said to be the case.

And closeness to his leader, though not antagonist, was definitely absent in Leon's case. In fact, this is an element with which I have long struggled. How is it possible for members of a stridently anti-government political movement to permit themselves to be lifted from the fray and transported to another country where they are required to give tongue and support to policies and direction which they adamantly oppose?

I will be told that even seasoned, professional diplomats frequently find themselves advocating tenets which they find offensive but do so because that's their job. I can understand this from among the class of bureaucrats trained for this purpose – but I find it difficult when a man who was virulent in his opposition to many (though not all) government policies voluntarily takes on this mantle.

Nevertheless, what emerges clearly is that Leon turned out to be

a dedicated and even brilliant representative of this country in a South American giant that lost itself when Juan Peron became its president in 1946 and has never recovered any sense of direction. What is so fascinating about Leon's experiences is that, on many occasions, he was witnessing problems in Argentina which found similar expression in South Africa and which were handled with the same degree (and sometimes worse) of cupidity and misdirection. It must have been galling.

It is also clear that Leon found much about Argentina with which to identify and enjoy. He is, in any event, an easy man with whom to discourse, and he and his wife made many acquaintances and even friends who will remain close despite the geographical constraints.

A modest comment did, however, raise my ire. Leon is a lawyer by training, though he hasn't practised the law for many years. Like many of this breed he regards Tom Denning, Master of the Rolls, with something approaching reverence. Denning may have been many things but a legal saint he wasn't. His involvement in the Profumo affair and the trial of the unfortunate and quite innocent Stephen Ward was frankly shocking as was the extraordinary position he adopted on the famous Guildford Four who received life sentences for their involvement in the Guildford pub bombings. The sentences were later revoked and the four exonerated.

Curiously, though Leon mentions Denning he does not include him in an otherwise useful index.

Nevertheless, this is a warm and welcoming book, written with transparent ease and an excellent command of syntax and language (except for a single split infinitive which made me wince).

The unanswered question when the reader finishes it is what is Leon going to do now? I'm not sure even he knows the answer to that. ♦