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Bark & bite we'll miss

Political memoirs are often long on policies and short on people, the writers more concerned with underlining their places in history than entertaining.

Tony Leon's *On the Contrary* is a page-turner that moves at a cracking pace through his Durban childhood and youth, into Johannesburg municipal politics and the National Assembly. When he leaves next year he'll have done 20 years' servitude there, enough, he rightly says.

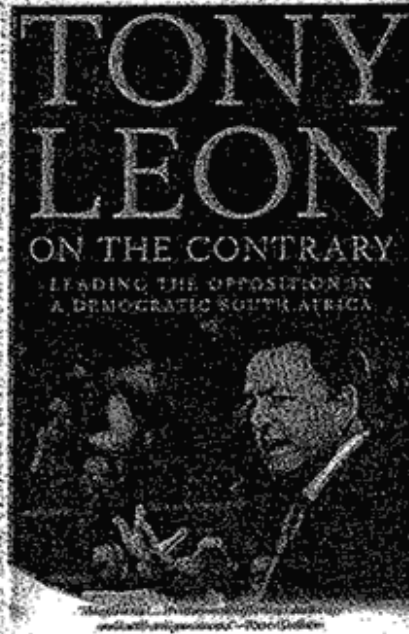
His success in building the DA into today's robust opposition, constantly yapping at the heels of the ANC with its 70% parliamentary majority is undoubted. But the road did wind uphill all the way.

Thabo Mbeki, who on becoming President forgot their previous amity, said, surprisingly, on Leon's departure: "I never had the courage to argue that he served merely as a chihuahua, because indeed he had the bark of a bull-terrier".

The bite too. Few, even his colleagues, escape this. Helen Suzman, he writes, hardly forgave him for snatching Houghton from Irene Menell whom la grande dame – as he calls Suzman – had decided should succeed her.

"While Zach de Beer, who represented the constituency of Parktown, next to my own in Houghton, once remarked: 'The voters of Parktown do not bother me, and I certainly don't bother them', I revelled in the nitty-gritty of constituency work."

BOOK REVIEW BY JILL GOWANS



But he directs as many slings and arrows towards himself: "Nevertheless, my own no doubt inflated sense of political self-worth was not shared by all my colleagues" – and admits mistakes like the DA's original support for floor-crossing and its disastrous collaboration with Marthinus van Schalkwyk and cohorts, whom he tears to shreds.

You've got to admire the searing honesty – all the more for its rarity.

The chapter "Against Goliath" will

help anyone still unconvinced of the need for a strong opposition. In Cape St Francis, a bucolic golfer belligerently asked Leon why he couldn't be more positive: "You're always attacking the government".

Leon recalls fellow MP Donald Lee saying: "You never hear that sort of remark in the coloured community".

Big business and the largely "supine media" get chunks torn out of them (he acknowledges a later "seismic shift" in the print media): "The ANC's near-domination of the political terrain and its will to impose its writ across the whole of society seemed to me as leader of the opposition my greatest challenge. I had assumed other, more powerful, actors in the business and civil realm would fight their respective corners. I had made the wrong assumption."

In this 766-page doorstopper Leon writes elegantly, with erudition and wit. Approaching business for funds post-1994 he found contributions to the DA had become "radio-active".

"In foreign policy, as at home, ANC policy bore a striking resemblance to the 'doublethink' which George Orwell defined as 'the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind and simultaneously accepting both of them'."

Nelson Mandela said: "You know, Tony, you will be missed much more than you might realise" Leon's book tells you why.

□ *On the Contrary* by Tony Leon (Jonathan Ball, R254, softcover).