

<http://www.economist.com/node/11919285>

The Economist

The other side of the fence

Aug 14th 2008 | from the print edition

TONY LEON, a firm believer that South Africa needs a robust opposition to the overwhelmingly dominant African National Congress (ANC), leaves few people indifferent. Friends and foes respect or despise him for his combative - some would say aggressive - style and abrasive wit. He rose to prominence as the face of the South African opposition just after the death of apartheid. After 13 years at the helm of a party that he saved from the brink of irrelevance and turned into the country's main opposition force, he voluntarily stepped down from the leadership of the Democratic Alliance (DA) in 2007. Mr Leon's political evolution, from opposition to apartheid to opposition to the ANC government, charts the trajectory of the country's young democracy.

The son of middle-class Jewish parents - his father was a judge - he became obsessed with politics at an early age. He started campaigning for the liberal, English-speaking, white opposition to the apartheid regime at the age of 12. "The narcotic of political activism and involvement has remained a lifelong habit," says Mr Leon. The firm belief in individual opportunities, free markets and social justice has never left him, and he has fought tirelessly to advance a cause that has never been widely popular in South Africa. During his university days, left-wing ideology dominated anti-apartheid student politics, and since the advent of democracy liberalism has become a slightly dirty word for the ruling ANC.

Thanks to his political flair and dynamism, he rose fast within the ranks of the Democratic Party, as it was then known, ruffling some famous feathers on the way, including those of Helen Suzman, an anti-apartheid liberal icon. Just before the country's first democratic election, he took the reins of a party squeezed almost out of existence by internal divisions and the weight of the two political giants of the time, Nelson Mandela's ANC and F.W. de Klerk's National Party, which had run South Africa during apartheid. The Democratic Party got less than 2% of the vote.

By the time Mr Leon bowed out, his party was the largest opposition movement. Despite its roots in English-speaking liberalism, the DA had supplanted the National Party as the party of choice for Afrikaners, as the descendants of the country's earliest European settlers are known. But it was a messy process: the two parties briefly joined forces, in what Mr Leon describes as "a marriage made in hell". In the end, in an ironic twist, the leaders of the former party of apartheid joined its nemesis, the ANC, while the rank-and-file stuck with the DA. But the party has failed to attract many black voters, condemning it to permanent opposition.

Largely chronological, Mr Leon's autobiography is also partly thematic. He describes his involvement in, and shares his thoughts on, some of the country's biggest challenges: AIDS, Zimbabwe, the erosion of parliament's oversight role since 1994, and what he sees as the ruling party's attempt to extend its tentacles into independent institutions such as the media and the courts.

He enjoyed a warm relationship with Mr Mandela, whose offer of a cabinet job Mr Leon nonetheless turned down in 1997. Later, when Mr Mandela accused the opposition parties of being "Mickey Mouse organisations", Mr Leon retorted that he ran a "Goofy government". A few weeks later, Mr Leon heard a knock on the door of his hospital room just before he was to undergo open-heart surgery. It was Mr Mandela, who called out, "Hullo, Mickey Mouse, this is Goofy, can I come in?"

This contrasted with the iciness that characterised Mr Leon's relations with Thabo Mbeki, Mr Mandela's successor as president. Mr Leon describes the battle for the leadership of the ANC last year between Mr Mbeki and Jacob Zuma as ~~the~~ the evil of two lesser+. Yet even Mr Mbeki has admitted that after believing Mr Leon to be a racist to the core, he came to realise he was a democrat to the bone.

Mr Leon's autobiography is eloquent, funny and rich, although it delves into his early years for too long, adding 200 unnecessary pages to a tome that already has nearly 800 of them. It is an important record of South Africa's young democracy, witnessed from the other side of the fence. As Mr Mandela told Mr Leon on his retirement, ~~you~~ you have played such a very important role in our country.+