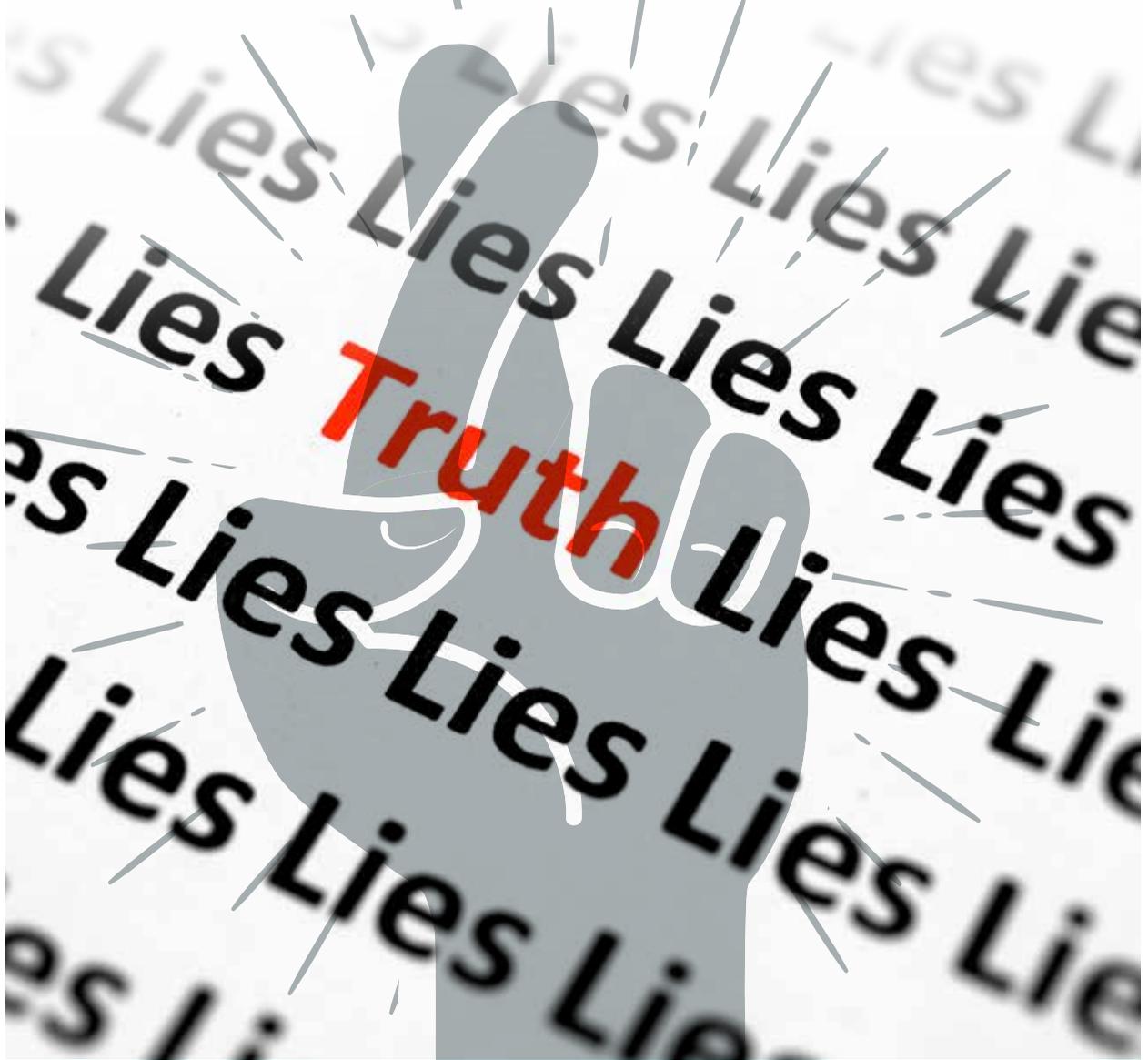


THE NEW SOCIOLOGY OF PUBLIC DISCOURSE

# White Lies



Leon's fake-letter-writing club filled the *Financial Mail* with fake facts, sent from invented email addresses, associated with non-existent human beings. And, worse, they used this anonymity to spew messages of xenophobic poison.

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By Ronald Suresh Roberts

First question for the new sociologists of knowledge: How did South Africa come to pass from apartheid's *The Lying Days* (Nadine Gordimer's critique, 1953), through post-apartheid truth and reconciliation (TRC, 1996-1998), only now to become mired in a Breitbartian regime of 'post-truth', caught between the snarling public relations machines of the illiberals (e.g., Tony Leon's Resolve Communications and its self-described 'Agitator model') and the kleptocrats (e.g. Gupta-Bell Pottinger)? "We often can be market lackeys and that's because corporations are so wealthy and so powerful and have so many spin doctors that we don't question the fundamentals of them very much", Ferial Haffajee said recently (Eusebius McKaiser Show, 2 August 2017). Why did attempts to foster organic democratic discourse after 1994 die in the cradle?

Even as the 'new South Africa' (the phrase itself strikes a weary old note today) established the TRC, a renewed era of cynicism, fake news and historical fraud was immediately in the making.

### The Illiberal Factory of Lies

Tony Leon, leader of the Democratic Party (predecessor of today's DA), told the *Boston Globe's* Ben Bradlee, Jr in 1998 that: "99 percent of whites in South Africa have 'truth fatigue,' and would like to just get on with it." In retrospect this interview was a telling encounter between the best of the old globalist journalism and the worst of contemporary propaganda. Just watch what each man did next.

After this TRC interview, Leon swiftly set about building a renewed regime of lies (described below), while Bradlee returned to Boston where, as Assistant Managing Editor responsible for investigations and projects, he soon launched an indefatigable search for truths concerning the systematic cover-up of sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. Bradlee's effort garnered a Pulitzer Prize (2003) and incubated an Academy Award for *Spotlight* (2015), the film that dramatised the investigation. By contrast, under the infamous 'Fight B[l]ack' slogan, Leon united the white right, Trump-style, to

become Leader of the Opposition in the 1999 election. And immediately upon re-entering parliament he established a covert 'special project' headed by parliamentary researcher James Myburgh and DA Parliamentary Counsellor, Nick Clelland, his business partner at Resolve Communications today.

The purpose of this 'special project' (the DA's own name for it), which was exposed in 2005-2006, was to capture the mainstream media 'as a vehicle' (*Business Day* editor Peter Bruce's own phrase), systematically to flood media letter-pages with fake letters from fake people bearing fake facts, and so to abuse and contain the pre-Polokwane ANC. In my memorandum to Bruce (a copy of which I still have), I summed up: "It is a fact that taxpayer-

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*funded DA researchers fraudulently masqueraded as the public itself in the pages of a magazine then edited by you. This was a fraudulent abuse of parliamentary funds. Parliament is after all meant to represent the public, not impersonate it. It was further a fraud upon your readers as your letters page is meant to facilitate their comments as spectators to the debate in your pages. It is wrong for gladiators to step from the ring into the audience to applaud themselves and insult their opponents in the supposed name of the public.”*

After many months of hesitation, Bruce himself outlined these facts in his column, upon which I'll expand in a moment. Bruce outed and condemned what he himself termed "the DA's Department of Lies": "What kind of people would so need to abuse the existence of a free press as to have to lie to editors and readers?" Bruce asked.

It is important at the outset to note the utter lack of consequences and accountability that ensued, despite Bruce's fine rhetoric at the time. In 2017 Leon and Clelland explicitly trade media influence for profit, while Leon enjoys writing columns for Tiso Blackstar papers: *Business Day*, *The Times* and the *Sunday Times*. The website of Resolve Communications, where Clelland is today Chief Executive Officer while Leon is Executive Chairperson, openly claims to "influence government policy at all levels to align with your business needs." Under their self-described 'Agitator Model' the duo offer their "proprietary communications model for your business". The 'Agitator Model' places paying clients "at the center [Leon's own American spelling] of campaigns designed to demonstrate . . . credibility and market leadership and – importantly – we take those campaigns to the objective news sections of the mainstream media – where their competitors couldn't even dream of appearing". (Italics and ellipses added). Here, then, is an open boastful confession that what deluded readers take for 'objective news' in the 'mainstream media' is curated by Leon and Clelland, for their clients, in ways that "competitors couldn't even dream of." This goes, if anything, further than the kinds of claims that Leon's nefarious business rival in the PR trade, Bell Pottinger, dares to make for itself, at least openly and on its own website. Despite his pained rant in 2006, neither Bruce nor *Business Day* has since dealt credibly with Leon's brazen, and now doubled, impropriety.

Important chapters of the recent and global "Breitbartization of public discourse" (See Lee Fang, *The Intercept*, 9 August 2017) demonstrably began as a proudly South African 'special project' in Cape Town, concocted by Tony Leon's Democratic Alliance between 2000 and 2008. Associates and defenders of this special project included a future editor-in-chief of Breitbart itself, Joel Pollack. Fully a decade before the special project kicked off, mere months after Nelson Mandela's release from prison in 1990, Leon and his then advisor, advocate David Unterhalter, predicted that their

own white support base “will carry a disproportionately large weight” in the new South Africa because it was “well educated, skilled and relatively well off” and so could “press the interests of a liberal [sic] order” upon the ANC (*Business Day*, 27 June 1990). But then the pre-Polokwane ANC powerfully resisted these pressures through superior intellectual counter-mobilisation, including the world’s first Presidential blog, initiated by President Mbeki in 2000. Desperate measures became necessary. Failed illiberal claims of meritocratic intellectual prowess now needed a helping hand. They needed (in Bruce’s own word) to “cheat.” They developed a pioneering technology of lies.

Consider Leon’s correct and justified indictment of the Gupta-Bell Pottinger combination: “It used, apparently, fake news, invented Twitter handles and worse, to spew a message of racial poison”. (*The Times*, 12 July 2017). Unfortunately for Leon, this litany of abuse is precisely the methodology that Leon and his parliamentary office themselves pioneered in the pre-twitter era, and with additional impropriety: they misdirected parliamentary research funds, parliamentary purpose, and the public service idealism of young graduates who had taken jobs with the DA.

#### **The DA “Special Project” (2000-2008): A Case Study in Information Warfare**

In November 2000 the *Financial Mail* published an article by Ferial Haffajee, in which Leon – fresh from the infamous 1999 “Fight B(l)ack” election campaign – announced his personal determination to return to his “transformative roots.” In the spirit of genuinely liberal exchange, I naturally asked: “What Transformative Roots, Tony?” (FM, 24 November 2000). I summarised what I had unearthed of Leon’s 1970s writings in *Paratus*, the official journal of the apartheid South African Defence Force. For example, writing of the SADF torture barracks at Voortrekkerhoogte, where chemical castration of gay servicemen was undertaken, plus “ordinary” forms of torture, Leon questioned: “Are these Detention barracks such an awesome

place?” He highlighted “pleasant gardens, “well-stocked library” and “innovations” such as weekly soccer, volleyball and baseball. In other articles, Leon glorified the SADF airships that had engaged in Angola and Namibia. He celebrated the fake 1976 “independence” of Transkei, and so on. Drawing upon this archive of Leon’s true past, I wrote a further piece, “It’s all lies not history” in the *Sowetan* for 28 November 2000.

In what amounts to a case study of the more general practice that was later exposed, Leon’s fake-letter-writing club filled the *Financial Mail* with fake facts, sent from invented email addresses, associated with non-existent human beings. And, worse, they used this anonymity to spew messages of xenophobic poison.

Leon’s parliamentary counsellor, Nick Clelland, drew on the racist

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repertoire of the pro-slavery Americans and now Charlottesville Nazis for the headline “A Carpetbagger with an Agenda” (for the unambiguously racist backstory of the term “Carpetbagger” see *Fit to Govern*, p.294-97). Among other “alternative facts”, Clelland graced me with a “mail order Oxford degree”. Both Balliol College, Oxford and local Minister of Education, Kader Asmal, corrected this defamation. Fake assessments of the integrity and academic credentials of opponents are standard operating procedure among illiberals, both before and after my own case (See, “Top Black At Wits Resigns”, 29 March 1996 *Times Higher Education*, on the defenestration of William Makgoba by an illiberal posse that smeared him with credentials-

fraud).

Six years later, these and other DA abuses having passed entirely undetected, I was approached by an ex-employee of the Democratic Alliance who had since moved to IDASA, and had there developed pangings of conscience concerning his own past (in 2017 he is a policy analyst in Washington DC). He confessed that I had been targeted as part of a broad-ranging “special operation” run from Tony Leon’s parliamentary office by Clelland, Ryan Coetzee and James Myburgh (Myburgh ghost-wrote Clelland’s “Carpetbagger” piece).

My informant disclosed that he personally authored a letter under the fake name ‘Sheila Woods’ sent from the phony email address sheilawoods@iafricana.com (Here was a white man impersonating a white woman and xenopobically attacking a black man, seventeen years before Marius Roodt impersonated Shelly Garland in order to hoax a black editor, Verashni Pillay, who then resigned). My white male informant, writing as ‘Sheila’ found it “shocking your magazine sees fit to print such bile under the pretence of political commentary” and added that “Roberts would do well to take his rabid ranting back to Trinidad and Tobago.” This echoed Ryan Coetzee’s xenophobic comment made personally to me, in the public gallery of Parliament, as documented in Khalo Matabane’s film, *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* (2005) “Go back to Jamaica [sic: Trinidad].” Additionally, my informant, cross-dressed as ‘Sheila’, maligned Thabo Mbeki, “who blooded his political mind during the torture and imprisonment of ANC dissidents at the notorious ANC prison camp, Quatro”.

In my two-page memo to Peter Bruce, of which I still have a copy, I added: “[my informant] explains, in a spirit of truth and reconciliation, that he was a young and impressionable recent UCT graduate. The parliamentary job was, I think, his first. He entered it idealistically. He recalls, however, that Ryan Coetzee told him early in his initiation that in order to be a competent DA researcher he had to ‘learn to think like a Nazi’. [My informant] swears Coetzee really said

that." And because the DA researchers sat open plan, my informant could explain, in meticulous detail, which of the other fake email addresses and letters lined up with each of the then DA researchers.

After many months of silence, and only after I had had circulated this memorandum to another newspaper while Bruce had seemed to ignore it, Bruce erupted. In his weekly column (29 May 2006), Bruce stated the facts and then commented:

*OK, so I was duped. But you have to ask what profit a political party would hope to gain by actively setting out to deceive the country's leading business and political magazine and its editor who, a few weeks later, was due to become editor of its most prestigious daily newspaper [Business Day]. You have to ask what childish prep-school mind must lie behind the deceitful point scoring against Roberts, using me as the vehicle. . . . You have to ask whether the DA leadership (Leon particularly; he is obsessed with Roberts) really ever thought it would not get found out. Or, if it did, that it would not matter. That, somehow, I could be counted on. Well, I am naive, I know. But I can't be counted on. I am angry. For all I know the DA's Department of Lies still exists. I cannot see myself trusting a pro-DA letter (or even an anti-ANC one) again. Anyone who writes me one of those from today, I'll have it well checked. It's a quite a thing when you can't trust the opposition.*

Black Huffington Post editor Verashni Pillay resigned for letting slip a single phony blog-post that involved neither taxpayer funds nor tampering with parliamentary integrity and media democracy. By contrast, Bruce kept his job with the media group and, bizarrely, Leon eventually initiated a column in *Business Day* (!). Bruce could be counted on, after all. This column Leon abused, as recently as 1 February 2016, when, under the headline "Mbeki's Race Rage" Leon insulted the entirety of "SA's intelligentsia" who "in the apt words of *Politicsweb* editor James Myburgh [have] 'descended into what can only be described as an era of racial madness'". Myburgh,

who had personally headed what Bruce himself had condemned as "The DA's Department of Lies" during the information war against Thabo Mbeki, is thus cited by Leon in *Business Day* in 2017 as an ostensibly objective 'editor' at arms-length from Leon, with no disclosure of the direct conflict of interest, prior lies, and past abuse of free speech, parliamentary monies and journalistic ethics. Here was the proprietary 'Agitator' model that Leon openly touts to clients, but now turned to Leon's personal legacy-protection purposes.

The next step *Netflix* could not script better: the DA's immediate response to Bruce's indictment, published the very next day (30 May 2006), was from Leon's speech-writer, Joel Pollack, who is today a Senior Editor at *Breitbart*, having previously served as *Breitbart's* Editor-in-Chief and also as its in-house lawyer. Pollack was also a failed anti-Obama "tea-party" candidate in the 2010 US Congressional elections. Pollack personally turned *Breitbart* Trump-wards. During the defining incident of the 2016 US election campaign, where *Breitbart* reporter Michelle Fields was allegedly physically assaulted by Trump's campaign manager, Corey Lewandowski, it was Pollack who personally ordered *Breitbart* reporters to stop defending Fields: "In war, we wait for orders that are based on a careful plan. So wait." (*Buzzfeed*, 12 March 2016).

An ardent champion of Israeli aggression, Pollack is the author of *The Kasrils Affair: Jews and Minority Politics in the New South Africa* (2009). There is an outright parable in Pollack's abuse of Michelle Fields and the *Breitbart*-fuelled emergence, afterwards, of her uncanny opposite, James Fields, who has now ploughed a car into what they regard as anti-fascist carpetbaggers and scalawags in Charlottesville.

But back in 2006, all of this remained in the future. The "Breitbartization of public discourse" globally, which did not yet have that name, was still a local South African pilot project. Pollack, defending Leon's DA and not yet Trump's America, offered *Business Day* readers the further lie that I had written speeches for President Mbeki. And his entire letter was an explicit

manifesto for the Shelly Garland fraud to come: "In a political climate such as ours, where expressing a dissenting opinion earns you a label like 'coconut' or 'racist' from the ruling party, pseudonyms may even become a necessary part of the open contestation of ideas."

Bruce himself appended the following comment at the foot of Pollack's published reply: "It is very simple: people should take responsibility for what they say and not hide behind false identities. It is all very well someone writing a speech for a minister or politician provided that minister or politician's name is on the letter. That is not a cheat. The letters I referred to in my column yesterday were deceitful and, much worse, cowardly. If you're scared of being called a racist or a coconut then be quiet."

The flurry of further correspondence underlined my informant's earlier point: that this cheating was no isolated incident, but rather what Herman Lategan described as "a dastardly *modus operandi*" of Leon's DA. James Sanders told of abuse encountered directly from Myburgh:

*When Noseweek, under my temporary editorship, originally exposed the secret [DA] letter-writing club (April 2005), I was subjected to a torrent of malevolence from former DA researcher and 'special operations' man James Myburgh. It was certainly bizarre. . . . In the article I detailed Leon's 'petty, undignified and downright weird' obsession with author Ronald Suresh Roberts. Myburgh, who is believed to be preparing a doctoral thesis on Thabo Mbeki's ANC, responded with a vicious e-mail that defamed Roberts, while urging: 'Please do not forward this to Roberts.' As the letter was not marked private and confidential, I published it with a reply in Noseweek (May 2005). Even though I was editing the magazine, I had to overcome substantial resistance to get it into print. When Myburgh realised that I was going to publish his letter, he wrote to "editor-in-chief" Martin Welz and a second member of the Noseweek staff declaring that Roberts wrote my*

copy. Myburgh also wrote to a third party that Roberts and I were lovers. I have copies of the three e-mails.

During 2016 *Business Day* subsequently allowed this man to masquerade as the impartial “editor of Politics web” so that Leon might characterise Mbeki as enraged and ineffectual, and the entire “SA intelligentsia” as insane?

Leon was almost speaking of himself, as well as of the Gupta-Bell Pottinger clan, when he launched this broadside: “The Guptas and their agents, at home and abroad, have used some of the darkest arts to advance their dubious cause and disparage all who stand in their way. But the exposé of their disinformation campaign and the public shaming of those responsible has illuminated the massive roadblock that stands in their way.”

I say “almost” purely because there is no corresponding “roadblock” in the case of Leon and friends. In a reflection of the impunity that whiteness conveys within our still-racialised sociology of Public Discourse, Myburgh has actually published posts defending the Shelly Garland impostor (*Politicsweb* 20 April, 2017) and Pollack himself (“In Defense of Joel Pollack”, 23 February 2017) and has characterised allegations of anti-Semitism and white nationalism against Steve Bannon as “thinly sourced”, while congratulating himself and Pollack for imagined “values of liberal non-racialism.”

### The Persistent Whiteness of Public Discourse

To grasp this resilience of whiteness, trace its hinterland beyond DA zealots and into pseudo-respectable South Africa, among those the pre-Polokwane ANC called (citing Ngugi wa Thiong’o) the “laureates of the neocolonial establishment”.

Prominent among these is Edwin Cameron, central to the anti-Mbeki information war that weaponised the HIV/AIDS issue. Cameron has now explicitly let slip the white pride ideology that was always implicit in his propaganda. Speaking at Wits University on “PEN and Freedom of Expression and LGBT and Rights” in December 2014, Cameron correctly advanced the cause of gay rights, which

incidentally Mbeki openly championed since the mid-Eighties, while Cameron was, by his own concession, still a closeted and self-hating gay man. At Wits, Cameron deployed this brutal mis-analogy between gay pride and white pride:

“I’m a proudly gay man. . . . It’s part of my constitutive humanity. It’s part of what makes me human. My gayness is as much part of me as being white is. And why am I proud? It’s ‘cause I’m proud to be white. Not because it’s better than being black, but just because that’s me. I think that’s fine. And so with my gayness. It’s perfectly fine to be gay.” (YouTube@1:10: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0dZTyWD6P1Q>)

This is moral and political idiocy. The refusal to apologise for being gay is necessary and appropriate, given the subordination and stigma that have victimised LGBT identity through hetero-normative histories. Any

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similar unapologetic pride regarding apartheid and global whiteness, which by definition victimise blacks and blackness, is grotesquely misplaced. Cameron still cannot see what gay icon James Baldwin meant when said in *The Price of the Ticket*: “As long as you think you’re white, there is no hope for you. As long as you think you’re white, I’m going to be forced to think I’m black”. Nor does Cameron know what lesbian icon Susan Sontag meant when she said “the white race is the cancer of human history”. Cameron’s tired dis-analogy between gayness and whiteness illustrates that Leon knew whereof he spoke when he said in 1998 that most whites have “truth fatigue.” Against this ideological

backdrop, “white lies” are inherently the trivial ones. Hence accountability and financial penalty for the black Ms Pillay; impunity for white Myburgh; impunity plus PR profiteering for Clelland and Leon.

And so: every day still brings obvious lies told casually and without consequence in the HIV/AIDS debate, even as the critique of Mbeki’s AIDS policy formulation process between 1996 and 2007 has factually unravelled over the last decade, even more drastically than it already had when I published *Fit to Govern* (2007). The full update on the state of the AIDS policy debate is grist for a separate essay. For now, merely contrast the self-congratulatory headline that the former AIDS-drug lobbyist, Mark Heywood, offered in the *Daily Maverick* for 15 August 2017 (“Fighting for truth, fighting against lies: civil society, media and public activism”) against the casual lie that Heywood’s own Treatment Action Campaign comrade, Nathan Geffen, told in the *Daily Maverick* itself, mere weeks earlier (18 July 2017).

Geffen wrote: “During the Mbeki era [Andile] Mngxitama attacked HIV scientists, which suited Mbeki’s Aids denialist agenda.” As evidence Geffen linked to a *Sowetan* piece where Mngxitama indeed critiques research-safety – but Mngxitama’s piece is dated 27 July 2010! (Geffen’s piece, with *Sowetan* link, is here: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2017-07-18-groundup-op-ed-taken-of-black-opinion-website-exposes-poor-sa-internet-law/#.WZWmlq2ZNE4>)

In fact, Mngxitama has always been a vociferous critic of Mbeki, is a present-day mimic of the disruptive “direct action” tactics of the TAC itself and, indeed, began as the TAC’s stable-mate within the Western-funded NGO sector (Mngxitama made his public debut in 2005 as an EU-funded land rights researcher). Mngxitama featured on the *Mail & Guardian*’s post-Polokwane list of “Young South Africans from Civil Society whom you must take to lunch” (28 June 2008), in company with IDASA’s Judith February; Nicole Fritz, whose Southern African Litigation Project, funded by the United States government, subsequently sought the arrest of the

Sudanese President Omar al Bashir; and Prince Mashele, another foreign-funded Mbeki-bashing think-tank fish. Mngxitama even managed to insinuate the “denialism” narrative into Mbeki’s celebration of South Africa’s 2007 Rugby World Cup win: “Who would have thought rugby would unite a sad, crime-ridden country, ravaged by HIV/AIDS, and battered by poverty?” (*The Weekender*, 17 May 2008). But the TAC in 2017 effortlessly lies in order not only to disavow its own anti-Mbeki ally, but audaciously to taint the Mbeki legacy by this non-existent association!

### The New Sociology of Public Discourse

And yet: these desperate measures signal that the pre-Polokwane ANC is actually winning the hegemonic “war of position”, even if the actually existing ANC administration is too distracted and corrupted to press these normative and discursive gains into practice. It is impossible, for instance, to imagine the native assistant, Xolela Mangcu, repeating at all what he wrote with such self-assurance in the Peter Bruce-Tim Cohen illiberal press a decade ago: “[in *Fit to Govern*] Roberts takes us into Fanon’s definition of the native, which is essentially that natives are the colonised within the resistance tradition all over the world. But which country’s colony are we still?” (*Weekender*, 30 June 2007). These days, by contrast, pre-Polokwane ANC ideology impinges even upon Leon’s odious *Business Day* column, where Leon pronounces Fanon “eerily prophetic” when warning of black middle class corruption (18 August 2017). Presumably Leon belatedly detects similar prophetic qualities in Mbeki’s 2000 NIEP Oliver Tambo Lecture (11 August 2000), which so agitated illiberal native assistants with its indictment of “the Caliban native petit bourgeoisie, with the native intelligentsia in its midst, that, in pursuit of well-being that has no object beyond itself, commits itself to be the footlickers of those that will secure the personal well-being of its members.” Of course, Leon’s problem is not with self-serving native assistants as such, only with those aligned

elsewhere (Bell Pottinger, not Resolve Communications; Gupta handouts, not U.S. State Department ones).

Hence: The self-styled best, these days, are also simultaneously the worst and they are, in both guises, passionately confused about “Mbeki nostalgia”, while also lacking all conviction, even upon that very same subject: “Nostalgia for Thabo Mbeki on twitter is disturbing: amnesia, I thought, afflicts only older non-twitter generations . . . not so” (Eusebius McKaiser, 2012); “I miss Thabo Mbeki and Ronald Suresh Roberts. Unless you save a screen grab . . . I will deny this tomorrow” (McKaiser again, 2015); “Frankly, those who romanticise Mbeki do so ONLY because Zuma is their yardstick. If Zuma were not as ruinous, you wouldn’t misremember Mbeki” (McKaiser again, 2017). McKaiser misremembers his very self.

In the last reporting period alone, *City Press* circulation has slid from 92,193 to 68,645. Compared to their relative importance a decade ago, political illiberals, mainstream media, and their embedded native assistants, symptomise what Moses Naim analyses in his book, *The End of Power: From Boardrooms to Battlefields and Churches to States – Why Being in Charge Isn’t What It Used to Be*. For Naim, power everywhere has become easier to get, harder to use, and easier to lose than ever before. This includes state, media and corporate power. The old gatekeepers remain in their posts but meanwhile, to either side of them, the walls have fallen, so that truths re-enter.

And yet there are still no easy victories: Obama’s buoyant 2008 mantra that “elections have consequences” is as true of the dystopian outcome of the 2016 US Presidential elections as of the intra-party ANC contest at Polokwane. Stuff happened. And those illiberals who habitually misquote Lord Acton’s dictum that power “tends to corrupt” ought rather to look to George Bernard Shaw: “Power does not corrupt men; fools, however, if they get into power, corrupt power.”

And so the centre does not hold. The illiberal Western Cape government offers “repurposed colonialism”.

Johannesburg’s illiberals offer violent “shock and awe” against immigrants, promising “overwhelming power and spectacular display of force to paralyse the enemy’s perception of the battlefield and destroy its will to fight” (*Citizen*, 16 August, 2017). Meanwhile, the intra-party magic alternative to ANC’s presiding kleptocratic faction is a platitudinous “National Development Plan” that, as has been widely noted, remains more vision than detail. The stuff that happened is going to stay happened, if I may dispense with syntactical niceties.

So: what is to be done? In the truth and reconciliation moment of the 1990s everybody quoted Milan Kundera’s 1979 novel, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: “the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”. But Kundera’s *Slowness* (1995) better speaks for the stamina that memory needs during the new Now: “The degree of slowness is directly proportional to the intensity of memory; the degree of speed is directly proportional to the intensity of forgetting.” By contrast with the microwaved junk food of twitter and the radio shows, Mbeki in 2004 had already asserted that “The African university should make the real fire that cooks.”

The substantial agenda of this war of position remains visible in “Mbeki’s essential legacy” (BBC website, 11 December 2007), which references the pre-Polokwane policy document: the ANC cannot, this document urged, “behave like a shapeless jellyfish with a political form that is fashioned hither and thither by the multiple contradictory forces of sea waves.” But that was a prior ANC, an ANC whose best energies are today fundamentally archival. And this tireless archival activism will, in the spirit of Ahmed Timol, outrun those who, twenty years ago, already confessed their “truth fatigue” – and who have since then, very logically, build giddy twitter feeds and fast-food factories of lies.

At this conjuncture we do well to remember the words of the late Stuart Hall: “An archive may be largely about the past, but it is always re-read in the light of the present and the future...”. ■