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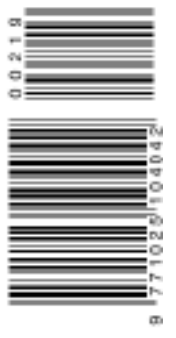
219 JANUARY 2018



**Russian madness
+ KZN mayhem**

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will ride**

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Letters

Zuma: the tipping point

YOUR EDITORIAL COMMENTS ON *THE* Jacques Pauw book: I was wondering when you were finally going to take some glory, and say “we told you so!”. So many of the shocking news headlines today relate to stories that we, as loyal readers, knew about years ago.

Jennifer Spencer
Dunvegan, Gauteng

■ YOUR ACCURATE AND COURAGEOUS reporting of the Hawks’ disbandment in KwaZulu-Natal [*starting with nose149 in March 2012!*] came to mind when I watched Jacques Pauw and Major General Johan Booysen (now retired) being interviewed recently live on television.

What a loss to crime prevention in our country to see such a dedicated and honourable career policeman reduced to being repeatedly suspended on trumped up charges eventually leading to his early retirement.

At the time of the disgusting so-called “exposé” in the *Sunday Times* I immediately cancelled my then subscription of that discredited rag. One magazine that I will never be without is *Noseweek*.

The fearless courage that you and your journo sources display is legendary – more power in 2018 to your pens!

Heather
Cape Town

■ THE SENTIMENTS EXPRESSED IN *nose218*’s editorial are spot-on. Several recent books on the national condition, including Jacques Pauw’s, contain much information already in the public domain. But they join the dots and paint a big picture that allows a broader and overall understanding of the current nature of the South African state.

The situation is bleak indeed. The only two institutions wholeheartedly holding the line against collapse are the judiciary and (parts of) the media. Civil society can put marchers on the street, but it has no overall unity of purpose.

South Africa is fast developing into a gangster state. The barriers between upright, patriot citizens and powerful forces of political criminality become weaker by the month.

Like Brexit Britons, South Africans are sleepwalking towards political and economic meltdown.

Christopher Merrett
Pietermaritzburg

Facebook de-faces *Noseweek*

A RATHER DEFENSIVE MOVE ON THE PART of fb, banning the use of a portrait of their boss Mark Zuckerberg in an ad promoting your November issue (“Facebook de-faces *nose218*”).

When will they learn that this is the perfect way to draw extra attention to the extraordinary wealth and power of Mr Zuckerberg? Well done on being noticed internationally, Mr Nose. This particular *Noseweek* story (how the world’s ultra-rich see the growing number of poor as just another profit opportunity) needs a wide audience.

Noeleen Palmer.
Cape Town

For those who still have not read the extract from Jacques Peretti’s book, Done, in nose217, should do so right away – or buy the book! – Ed.

Stain city – ain’t it a pity

YOUR REPORT ON DOUW STEYN’S LATEST extravaganza, Steyn City, “Robbing the poor to make the rich richer” (*nose218*), sent me to my records: The City of Johannesburg Municipal Valuation for Steyn City Office Park (Riverglen erf 4, portion 120) at 1 Tele Sure Lane, is an absurdly low R24.6 million which delivers peanuts in rates. A simple site inspection with an ex-St Stithians College cricket pal, together with a title deed search, revealed that it had been purchased in 2015 for R480 million.

Jack Lundin’s comment regarding the sumptuous Palazzo Steyn mansion (Dainfern Ext 34, Erf 2274) being worth R250m is slightly closer to the mark: it was sold to one of Steyn’s fellow directors in 2015 for R285m.

This overstated figure has become

the top residential sale price in South Africa, eclipsing the high-end Cape Atlantic Seaboard properties by many millions, although in terms of location, location, location, the Palazzo Steyn is bang next door to the Diepsloot Township.

Rob McLaren
Howick

Now see page 24. – Ed.

■ THE ONGOING THEFT OF MILLIONS from SASSA pensioners by Douw Steyn Enterprises, is surely up there in the First League of “Captured Accounts” deserving urgent action by the Hawks rather than the Black Sash. (Bless them for their efforts to date!)

If the Hawks are short of manpower I am sure I could muster an intelligent task force. The money must be recovered and returned to aggrieved parties!

Douw-ry-wie
Bloemfontein

Paedo thief mining Waterberg

SHOWS YOU THAT DESPITE KING 1 TO 4 AND all other so-called ethics policies coming from listed companies, they don’t give a shit about the environment and the people they hire. How did Mercantile Bank hire this guy with what must have been a CV full of unexplained periods of unemployment? (“How Lowe can you go?” – *nose217*.)

Vic
Muizenberg

■ *Why is this piece of s**t allowed to remain in South Africa?!*

Mike & Val Turner
Randburg

■ I FIND IT UNBELIEVABLE THAT Mercantile Bank and other banks and insurance agencies in South Africa can be so despicable that they would go to the lengths of drawing out court cases, specifically where they and their staff have blatantly stolen monies, in order to bankrupt their accusers and make the cases disappear.

Is there no way these atrocious acts can be stopped?

Of course I have no doubt that

the attorneys acting on their behalf continually ask them to please settle the court case so that they can stop earning the obscene amounts of money they do.

Shame on our despicable banking and legal systems!

Clive Varejes
Gallo Manor

Vodacom deserves to be sued

ON BIDVEST EXEC SUING VODACOM FOR deducting unauthorised payments to “content providers” (*nose217*): Good!

I’ve been trying for two months now to get refunded the thousands that I’ve been charged on my bill. It finally stopped, but Vodacom refuses to refund me, claiming they are “just the billing agent”. The dealer is as good as the stealer in my eyes.

Hanro Manefeldt
Port Elizabeth

They are the ones who paid out your money without your consent. Sue the bastards! – Ed.

■ ADD MTN TO THE LIST! YEARS WERE lost from my life, trying to get

answers from them when they enabled a gaming thief to deduct money from my account every day for a year. They billed it as “data” so it remained undetected for 15 months – my fault, of course. But was I happy when my contract ended! I am now delighted with my new phone and fantastic contract with Telkom.

I’ve advised several friends and family members to try Telkom and they are also pleased. (Telkom should reward me for free advertising!) Try them!

Jennifer Ann Christie
Johannesburg

Sticky fingers ‘were not mine’

IN NOSE204, UNDER THE HEADLINE “Bank gets its sticky fingers on investor’s keyboard programme” it was reported that a company called ADS had sued Standard Bank for allegedly misappropriating some of its proprietary computer programming. More than a year later Corneil du Plessis, one of the bank employees named in the story, has written to complain that he was falsely impli-

cated. We publish a short extract from his letter hereto acknowledge receipt of his complaint and alert interested readers to it. The full text can be found on Noseweek’s website. – Ed.

ALTHOUGH I WAS ACCUSED OF WRONG-doing in the [*nose204*] article, I was never asked for my comment.

I left Standard Bank in July 2006... [To explain why he had not responded to the Noseweek story sooner:] ADS has embarked on a new lawsuit claiming that the original trial prejudiced their case and naming me as a respondent.

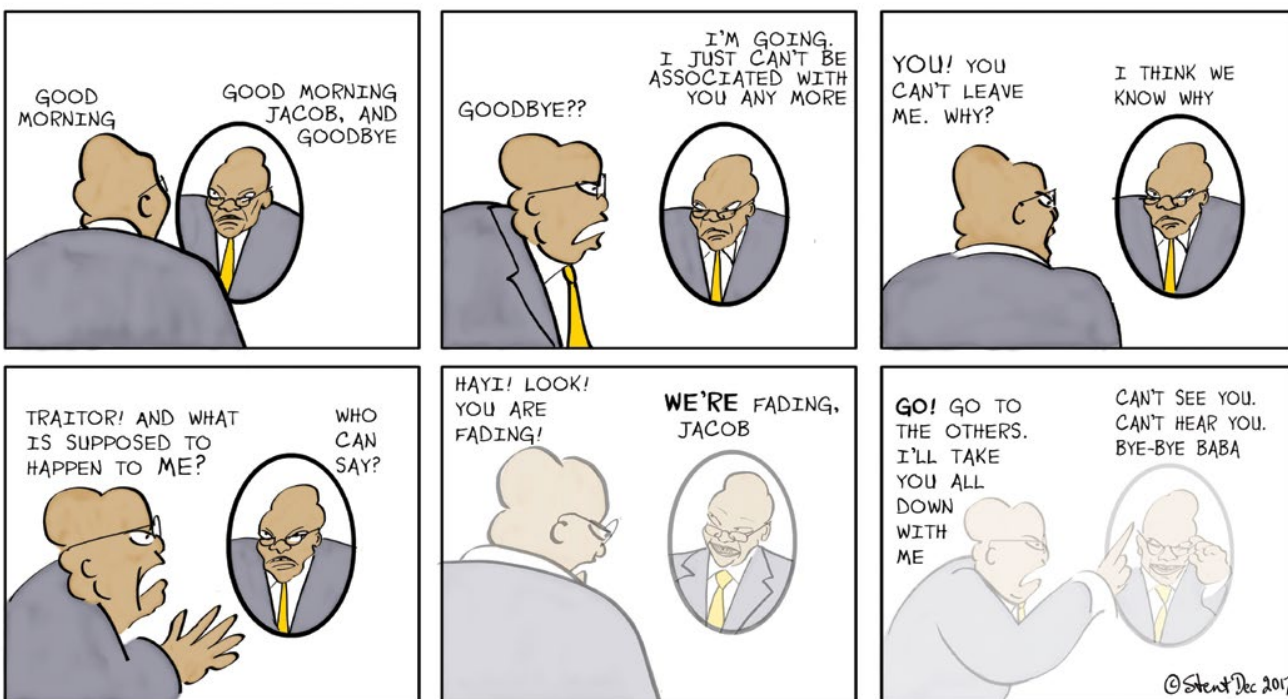
The author of the *nose204* article did not check for inconsistencies and contradictions in his story.

It is also claimed there were no fewer than 15 people at the meeting.

I was there. There were only three people from Standard Bank...

Standard Bank’s pinpad development was started on 23 July and went into production on 25 July 2003. The meeting with ADS was on 18 August 2003.

Corneil du Plessis
Johannesburg



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Editorial

Drought: learning from others' mistakes

WHEN CAPE TOWN MAYOR PATRICIA de Lille addressed the Cape Town Press Club recently she gave her audience a little insight into what the dreaded Day Zero would be like if or when the Mother City's water supplies run out.

The population of Cape Town – the country's second-largest city and Africa's most popular tourist destination – has grown rapidly over the past two decades and is now more than 3.75 million people.

But infrastructure for the provision of water has not expanded. Making matters worse, this is the second year in a row of the Western Cape's most severe drought in recent history – confirming all the predictions of imminent climate change.

De Lille told a riveted assembly of mainly middle-class Capetonians that it had been anticipated that Day Zero would be May 20 – but now it will probably arrive a week sooner because a day of rain the previous week had joyful Capetonians splurging on deep baths and long showers.

"What you did last week was that you moved Day Zero to May 13th, one week earlier," she admonished.

Turning to what will actually happen on Day Zero, she said: "That will be when our dam levels reach 13.5%. On that day... we will turn off the taps and we will have 200 water sites around the City of Cape Town, where each person must go and collect water and you will get 25 litres per person per day.

"That amount of water is what the World Health Organisation has prescribed as the minimum. The points will be open 24 hours, seven days a week and we will ensure essential services like clinics have water."

However, taps will not be turned off in the city's 230 informal settlements which account for about 3-4% of water usage. These areas will have reduced water pressure but there will still be water in the taps.

"The risk of turning off taps completely in densified areas is that it can cause a health risk or can lead to a disease outbreak. There

can also be riots," De Lille said.

The mayor sounded the warning that "the days of abundance are over". But she was confident, that, through the city's "working around the clock", Day Zero could be avoided.

During question time, a journalist who had quickly done a few sums, asked a perturbing question: "We are a city of approaching four million people, and will be serviced by 200 water points. That's 20,000 people a day (at each water point). Surely that means that riots are likely. Is it not possible to get more water points?"

In reality, fewer than half that number are adults capable of queuing and carrying away the required weight of water for a family, but the problem remains.

De Lille's response: "But that will be 24 hours a day, seven days a week. "The water points that we have selected – and we are still mapping them across the city – must be close to a water connection site that can take (the traffic)," she said. "We are still looking at spreading them out."

One woman put up her hand and stated, agitatedly: "I live in Newlands... not far from Spring Street, where more and more people have been fetching water from the spring. The road is fully blocked every day. Nobody can get in. Now and then the police come and try to help people get in and out of the road. People double-park, builders are coming with buckets.

"Have you made allowances for parking for all the cars that will be driving to these water points? (Try carrying a 25-litre container of water!)"

To which De Lille replied that she has her eyes on sports grounds and other big communal sites. But, how will the city manage those crowds if Day Zero does come upon us?

And what about next year, and the years after that? And the gardens? The factories? Farming areas around the city?

Drought could have as devastating an effect on Cape Town as hurricane floods have had on Houston and New Orleans. They, too, ignored all the warnings.

The Editor

The Russian Connection



President Jacob Zuma meets (from left) KZN businessman and local fixer Nhlamhla Gcwabaza, Russian businessman Alexander Tokmurzin, Czech funder Stanislava Rousova, Russian rocket designer Oleg Vasiliev, German consultant Michael Will and South African consultant Mathanda Mathenjwa

Vladimir Putin's crowd conjured up a plan to build a R300bn 'aerotropolis' in Maritzburg. There was cash to be harvested and Jacob Zuma was on board, but the madcap extravaganza came crashing down one drunken night. Jonathan Erasmus reports

JUST FIVE DAYS AFTER PRESIDENT Jacob Zuma signed a memorandum of understanding with President Vladimir Putin over Russia's intended "cooperation" in South Africa's planned R1-trillion nuclear-build programme, a motley bunch of Eastern European investors arrived in Durban for a meeting with Zuma.

The delegation was led by a little-known Czech non-profit organisation called the Open Doors of Europe Fund, headed by its president, a Mrs Stanislava Rousova. The main purpose of the fund is purportedly to channel buckets of Russian money for special international projects.

On 14 July 2015 Zuma received the group at John Dube House, the KwaZulu-Natal presidential home,

to be briefed about the fund's grand plan to build a massive US\$21-billion (approximately R300bn at the time) "aerotropolis" outside Pietermaritzburg, KZN's modest capital city.

The proposed project – which clearly had no commercial prospects – was nicknamed "Project Jacob"; the Russian partners had suggested that, when completed, it would be called the JG Zuma Aviation Centre. It was to include an aviation factory, building Russian planes known as A-7s and A-19s; an aerodrome complex; an aviation services complex; a university-style campus; a town; a 500MW coal-powered power plant; a railroad; factories; quarries; and an inland coal terminal.

It was also expected to have a "special customs zone" to provide a safe "avia-

tion highway to move VIP, business, securities, precious metals and gold".

The airport was to have a 4km runway, long enough to land international passenger aircraft.

Just two days after meeting Zuma at Dube House a South African company called Avrora SA (Pty) Ltd was registered to act as a so-called SPV (special purpose vehicle) to drive the project. Avrora is a name that has special significance in Russian history: it was the name of the Bolshevik-commandeered battle cruiser docked in St Petersburg which, on 25 October 1917, fired the shots that marked the beginning of the October Revolution and Soviet communism.

Design drawings, annotated in Russian, were commissioned from Dublin-based South African architect

Igmar Ferreira. Confidential documents including costings and progress reports were circulated. Meetings were scheduled and held with South African financiers, dealmakers, lawyers and bureaucrats. The funding, backed by Russian businesses and lenders, was said to be ready and the Russians were keen to start building.

Much of what *Noseweek* knows about these events is derived from a series of leaked documents, several interviews and a search of publicly available documents in Russia and the Czech Republic.

The airport never happened, for many reasons: there was infighting between the South African partners and between the Russian and Czech partners, culminating in the cancellation of a key meeting at the Riverside Hotel, Durban – largely because everyone got too drunk the night before. But possibly the biggest reason was that then-Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene bravely refused to sign any guarantees or sureties for the project.

(When Nene was sacked as Finance Minister in December 2015, The EFF said he'd been fired because he refused to take "illegal instructions" made by Zuma and his friends in both business and state-owned enterprises.)

Even Edward Zuma, son of the president, was contacted to intervene and help escalate approval for the project, but failed to sway Nene. This was despite the project's having been endorsed by both presidents Putin and Zuma, according to various sources and documents seen by *Noseweek*.

The ostensible "funders", the Open Doors of Europe Fund (Odef) was established in 2008 and by 2010 had become involved in only a few small projects – inter alia, according to its records – providing "humanitarian aid: medical and rehabilitation aids" to South Africa.

Only in 2014 did the fund become seriously active, when it began sourcing business funding from Russia. Its apparent lack of activity is mirrored by the notable absence of annual reports filed with the Czech authorities. A Czech source told *Noseweek* the country is extremely bureaucratic and requires filings for all non-profits annually.

In its only available annual report – for 2014/15 – it is stated that "the fund is interested in developing trade and

cultural relations between the Czech Republic, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, China, as well as other democratic countries" (including, apparently, South Africa).

Rousova was also a director of the South African special purpose vehicle for the aerotropolis project, Avrora SA.

The Russian company expected to build the aeroplanes and do everything else aeronautical was Moscow-based FPK Ekotransenergomash-ATA (Etem-Ata) – loosely translated as The Eco Transport Machine Financial and Industrial Company. It appears to have links to the Russian government's military complex.

While the plane body was to be assembled in South Africa, the avionics were to be built in St Petersburg and the engines, in Voronezh. Both cities are home to military manufacturing plants that specialise in these fields.

Despite its long and imposing name and suggested top-level military-industrial connections, Etem-Ata's registered address is a flat on Kakhovka Street in Moscow. It was created specifically for the proposed South African project. It has three directors: Alexander Tokmurzin, Ivanovich Mikulin and Oleg Vasiliev.

Noseweek could not identify the first two names, however Vasiliev is an engineering hero from the Soviet-era. He was involved in the development of the first Buran, the then-USSR's version of the Nasa space shuttle. He also developed an intercontinental rocket for the Soviet state.

According to Russia's register of companies, Etem-Ata's main business was "scientific research and development in the field of natural and technical sciences", while its secondary economic activities include the "manufacture of air and spacecraft", mining, fishing and growing of "fruit and nut trees". *Noseweek* was informed that in order to work in the aviation industry the company would have to have the backing of the Russian state.

Vasiliev and Tokmurzin were also board members of Avrora SA, the South African special purpose company established for the project.

The Odef had also enlisted the services of Global Union Consulting, a firm based in Bad Homburg, Germany. Its representative on Avrora SA's board was Michael Will. The consultancy

firm's task was to pull everything together and "make the deal happen".

The South African partners were hustlers and government insiders. One was colourful Eastern Cape businessman Dr Austin Bene who, according to the Zimbabwean government mouthpiece *The Herald*, was at one stage "wanted by Interpol" because of his involvement in a doctors' union that Mugabe did not approve of. Bene studied medicine in Russia, is fluent in the language and has maintained close ties with that country. He became the CEO of Avrora SA.

The other local director of Avrora SA was KZN businessman Nhlanhla Gcwabaza, who represented the BEE partner called MCG Investments (Pty) Ltd. (Also on the MCG board at the time was Siyabonga Mchunu who *Noseweek* was told is "not a direct relation" of former KZN ANC leader Senzo Mchunu.)

Avrora SA's registered address is a house in a township just outside Pietermaritzburg.

Bene also enlisted the help of another consultant, Mathanda Mathenjwa, representing Afrisat Investments, a Mauritian-based consultancy located there for tax purposes, while all the members work and live in South Africa.

So why did it all fall apart? "Eventually greed got in the way," said a government insider.

According to a document headed "Executive Status Summary Report and Key Relationships" circulated by Avrora SA in February 2016, "Project Jacob" was to have been funded by Odef to the tune of US\$21,372,000,000 (\$21.3 billion) on a 10-year term, at "1-2% per annum". The interest would have been approximately US\$2,364,000,000 (\$2.3bn).

The deal finally fell apart at about the time of the change of premiership in KZN – after Senzo Mchunu was replaced as provincial ANC chairperson by incumbent Sihle Zikalala in November 2015. Arguments arose – by most accounts, between all the partners in Avrora. A key element of the deal was that Odef wanted a guaranteed return on their investment underwritten by the state. This was clearly not going to materialise.

An intriguing feature of this extraordinary development plan is that no-one is sure who initiated it – or at any rate

no one is telling. One character simply points a finger at another. However there is evidence that it was either the South African or the KZN provincial government who brought the investors into the country.

Just weeks before meeting Zuma, on 24 June 2015, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the South African and Russian governments, Etem-Ata, the KZN government and Odef.

“The guys were brought to South Africa and they wanted us to be a part of the deal,” said Gcwabaza.

“Mr Bene came with the Russians to KZN. He knew me from before. We were the BEE partner and were required to sort out local licences and land purchases. The Russians were the funders and brought the technical support. Our task was to present to the relative provincial government structures. It had the blessing of the president’s office.”

He listed several reasons for the deal’s falling apart. “One was because we needed more information. At that stage much of it was a gentleman’s agreement. The Odef was going to finance the project. We stopped on our side as we needed boxes to be ticked and they weren’t. I don’t think the money was dirty but no assurances had been provided of its source.”

Gcwabaza said there was also a fallout between the Open Door fund people and Etem-Ata, starting when Odef wanted complete control of the project, from making appointments to handling the cash. Bene, he said, also tried to push MCG Investments out.

“The project fell apart when Bene tried to go it alone and edge us out. Etem-Ata pulled out when I told them Bene can’t be CEO of Avrora because he was wanted by Interpol.”

Gcwabaza claimed that the shake-up in KZN politics which saw then-premier Mchunu replaced as leader of the ANC in the province and his subsequent sacking played a negligible role as the project had been stalling long before the change of leadership. He insisted there was no political involvement in the project.

Bene had a different story to tell: “We got the impression we had to use MCG Investments as a BEE partner because that was what the KZN provincial government required. Our worry was

red tape, so having a partner with the right access to meet the right people made MCG a good choice.”

He said another reason for the stalling was because there were middlemen asking for “donations”. “This eventually was one of the reasons our relationship broke down with MCG. Odef and the Russians were adamant they wanted everything to be above board but we had the impression we had to pay for access,” said Bene. He maintained that presidents Zuma and Putin and the Russian Government played no role – but then refused to answer any further questions, saying he was bound by confidentiality agreements.

The Russians however confirmed that the project was driven by the two governments. Asked why it had failed, Etem-Ata replied: “Изначально заявлено, что нужны не только «мозги», но и к сожалению деньги” which loosely translates into: “We initially stated that we need not only ‘brains’, but also money unfortunately” – in reference to Avrora SA’s failure to obtain guarantees from the National Treasury.

Michael Will from Global Union, who was a technical consultant, said that Zuma told them he supported the project but in reality they never

got any real support.

“We needed guarantees. It appeared as if the locals thought we would just hand them the money. Austin [Bene] came up with the airport idea. He said he could help and organise but he spoke too much and the project failed. People get side-tracked with projects like this where so much money is involved. He also brought in another investment partner, Afrisat. There were too many people involved.

“There was no government influence, otherwise the project would have happened,” said Will.

Global Union Consulting’s owner Mario Grothe, who spoke for Odef, told *Noseweek* “Russia was ready, the money was ready, the local guys weren’t”; the local partners were “fighting over ownership”.

“We spoke with various people in government and eventually we, as Germans, and Odef said ‘let’s stop’. There was no clear partner in the deal in SA that we could trust. We also had a different view to Etem-Ata’s on the project. There is no time for playing.

“It was clear the government did not have the power to get the project. We know the president was involved. We had evidence. We met his son Edward. He was also involved,” said Grothe.

Grothe said MCG Investments was sold to them as a company that “represents the KZN government” and would be the [national] government’s vehicle to “handle the guarantees”.

“We don’t give money to someone else in other countries. We manage the projects. The main contractor would have been Sineko International. When we use a local contractor the money disappears,” said Grothe who denied any knowledge that Sineko and Odef were in fact one and the same.

Sineko International is based in Brno, Czech Republic. It, like Odef, was run by Rousova, her husband and their daughter. When Odef holds an AGM, the minutes reflect the attendance of her husband and daughter. Sineko International is also a member of Odef’s board.

And that is not all. *Noseweek* is in possession of documents that reveal that this grand airport strategy was closely linked to the Russian-South African nuclear deal. But you’ll need to see next month’s *Noseweek* to find out more about that. ■

The deal finally fell apart at about the time of the change of premiership in KZN in November 2015. Arguments arose, by most accounts, between all the partners

Survé rides his unicorn up the newsroom Everest

Dr Iqbal Survé and unicorn (which despite its extensive medical qualifications doesn't insist on being addressed as 'Doctor')



BUSINESS REPORT, ONCE KNOWN FOR its stellar financial and business reporting, and to be found in almost all of Independent Media's titles, has become a favoured platform for press baron Iqbal Survé to promote his business cronies and disparage his competitors.

The writer doing the dirty work is none other than the *Business Report* executive editor Adri Senekal de Wet. These stories also have one significant similarity – at no point do any of them disclose Survé's interest in any of the businesses it unashamedly punts.

Survé, while professing he doesn't interfere with editorial direction, clearly does. Or, at the very least, is happy for Senekal de Wet to do so on his behalf.

From October to November 2017 *Business Report* ran at least five front page stories promoting an otherwise little-known technology business called Sagarmatha Technologies – in which Survé has a keen interest. Survé joined the company soon after it was established in 2014, and resigned as a director on 9 October 2017, just 15 days before Sagarmatha – which is Nepalese for Mount Everest – was celebrated in a front page *Business Report* story labelled "Exclusive".

By Mitzi Kaplansky

The fluff front-pager, which appeared on 23 October 2017, was on the appointment of "investor guru Paul Lamontagne", once head of Enablis Entrepreneurial Network, South Africa (nos82&83), as CEO of Sagarmatha Technologies.

It went on to call him a "visionary leader". The company was described as "an integrated multinational technology platform group" that was driving the "Silicon Africa" vision.

Four days later *Business Report* ran another front pager titled "Business consortium to invest \$1bn in Africa". It reported how US investment banker Harold Doley Jnr, representing a "consortium of international investors", had made an "unexpected announcement" at the "Business Report Ignite breakfast" in Cape Town, stating that his consortium would be investing US\$1bn in technology businesses in South Africa and other large African markets. Finance Minister Malusi Gigaba was present for the occasion.

There was, however, nothing unexpected about it: days later, *Business Report* led with a story headlined "Sagarmatha Technologies IAB:

Influential global leaders on board" (IAB stands for International Advisory Board). Besides being devoid of any news-value to warrant a front-page story, it sported a large picture of Lamontagne shaking hands with none other than Doley Jnr who had been appointed to the board. The article said the board appointments had "impressed global markets". Turn to Page 3, and there was the first of at least three full-page adverts by Sagarmatha announcing the board appointments. (The last appeared on 28 November 2017)

On 8 November, *Business Report* ran another front-page story headlined "Sagarmatha Technologies to invest R1bn in ANA". African News Agency

Survé, while professing he doesn't interfere with editorial direction, clearly does. Or, at least, is happy for others to do so on his behalf

(the old Sapa, SA Press Association's replacement) is controlled by Survé. This was not stated.

Sagarmatha's registered address on the 10th floor, Convention Tower, Foreshore, Heerengracht Street, Cape Town – is shared by several of Survé's businesses.

Senekal de Wet, the author of these articles, claimed in a 27 November editorial that *Business Report* had "tracked the rise of Sagarmatha Technologies" and that it was "the next emerging market technology platform growth and success story". The conflict of interest is not stated.

Then on 29 November *Business Report* ran yet another front-page piece under the heading "Sagarmatha... sparking African unicorns". Unicorn is a reference to company start-ups valued at more than US\$1 billion. The article, complete with a massive graphic, quoted Lamontagne saying that Sagarmatha would provide "the spark to many more African unicorns in the future".

Senekal de Wet ended her write-up with an "Editor's note" which stated that Sagarmatha aims to compete "with global technology giants such as Amazon, Facebook... and Naspers".

The level of interference in *Business Report's* editorial direction became most obvious when, on 20 November 2017, Senekal de Wet wrote a front-page lead titled "Corrupt deals cost ABB millions". ABB is a Swiss-based global corporate best known for its dominance in the electrical technology sector. The story claimed the company had been sued and faced corruption charges. This is true – except they were sued in 2010. And the corruption charges had been well publicised many months earlier – in February 2017. Nothing has changed since then. It was nothing more than a rehash of really old facts – with a purpose: to advance boss Survé's interests.

The story failed every editorial test to qualify as news, let alone front-page news. It did, however, neatly remind readers that in 2015 ABB was awarded "a US \$160 million (approx. R1,5 billion) ...control and instrumentation (C&I) works contract" by Eskom at Kusile Power Station, which Siemens had expected to win.

Survé has a keen interest in Siemens, having been its unbelievably well-paid

Pedigree of 'influential' board

OTHER MEMBERS OF THE BOARD OF Sagarmatha include Dutch billionaire Marcel Boekhoorn – who was once conned out of a £1 million by a down-and-out Yorkshire salesman who claimed he was selling London's Ritz Hotel – and Chinese businessman Dr Chung Hon Dak who, besides being a guest of honour of President Jacob Zuma in August 2015 when he donated R39.6 million to build an Eastern Cape school – has been buying distressed South African mining assets. Then there's Dirk Hoke, currently the CEO of Airbus Defence and Space

and a former CEO of Siemens Africa at a time when, in 2002, Siemens was successfully charged with habitual bribery by German and US authorities (noses120&121).

Dr Makaziwe Mandela, Nelson Mandela's eldest daughter, has also been elected to the board.

Meanwhile the listed directors of the company are almost all old Survé acolytes, including Alan Neil who was a business partner of Survé in the disastrous LeisureNet fiasco (noses59&98) and Aisha Pandor, daughter of Minister of Science and Technology Naledi Pandor. ■

BEE partner since 2001. ABB and Siemens are arch rivals in the electrical technology sector, invariably bidding against each other on most major contracts globally.

Unless they're fighting over a new contract and ABB's name needed to be trashed, another explanation could be that Eskom's suspended acting-CEO Matshela Koko's disciplinary hearing

restarted just days later. One of the charges he faces is that he undermined the Kusile tender committee by issuing instructions that certain contracts went to ABB.

In any event the article was no doubt a message to someone. And it's likely it was a message received – it can no longer be found on Independent Media's website. ■



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Knysna fire: secret CSIR report bombshell

A SECRET INTERNAL INVESTIGATION by scientists at the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research into the origin of the Great Fire that engulfed the Garden Route town of Knysna last year could open the floodgates to negligence lawsuits running into the billions against Knysna Municipality and its fire brigade.

The investigation, conducted by specialist scientists at the CSIR's prestigious Meraka Institute, set out to establish the origin of what is known as the western fire, which started in the forests of Elandskraal, 20km north-west of Knysna, in the early hours of June 7. Was it a long-smouldering forest fire ignited by lightning? Or a man-made log fire lit by a pine-cone in a farmland clearing?

The Great Fire was the worst, most fearsome conflagration on the Garden Route since 1869. More than 600 firefighters battled its separate blazes for days. Seven people died and 10,000 were evacuated from their homes. Some 487 properties in Eastford, Knysna Heights, Paradise and part of Knysna Central were destroyed and 1,533 households regis-

tered as disaster victims with Knysna Municipality.

Eskom engineer and scientist Dr Wallace Vosloo, whose Elandskraal farmhouse was one of the first to be devoured in the fast-moving inferno, claims the western fire's origin was a lightning strike last April 12, which caused an underground fire that was left to smoulder, unattended for eight weeks. Vosloo, an outdoors zealot addicted to longbow shooting and knife throwing, claims that despite repeated reports to the fire departments at Sedgefield and Knysna, no action was taken.

Forensic investigator Dr David Klatzow, retained by AfriForum to investigate the cause of the disaster, agreed with the smouldering-fire hypothesis, concluding that a combination of hot, dry weather conditions and the development of a strong north-west wind, "impelled it to life" to become a fully-fledged runaway fire in the early hours of June 7.

This smouldering-fire theory was dismissed out of hand by Knysna Chief Fire Officer Clinton Manuel and the town's new municipal manager Kam Chetty. They maintain that

the fire was started by an unknown person using a pine-cone as a fire-lighter in a farmland clearing. At a PowerPoint presentation by Manuel to the media on August 14, municipal manager Chetty stressed that the fire chief's findings had been driven by "proper scientific methodology". He said: "We now know for certain that the fire started in the clearing and was consistent with the weather pattern and human activity."

At the presentation, Chetty and fire chief Manuel both emphasised the importance of the scientific input they had received from the CSIR in coming to their conclusion. At the close, the municipal manager said: "This report included evidence and opinions of the CSIR and several other scientists and I must say that I am extremely impressed with their methodology."

Clinton Manuel's full 131-page report, devoted entirely to the controversial western fire, was released four days later, on August 18, complete with photographs of the very pine cone – bizarrely pictured on a bed of unscathed dry leaves – and charred logs which he claimed set off the runaway inferno.

Four days after that, AfriForum published the independent report they had commissioned from eminent forensic scientist Dr David Klatzow. Klatzow concluded the cause was the lightning strike site that had been left to smoulder.

In his report Klatzow said: “Of concern is the timely and repeated warnings given to the authorities regarding this fire. It appears that these warnings did not result in any action being taken. Prompt fire prevention methods such as water-bombing and ground crews may very well have averted this western fire catastrophe.”

Chetty retaliated angrily, saying Klatzow’s report was “one-sided and purports to apportion blame on Knysna Municipality”. The municipal manager added: “The Knysna municipal investigation is based on a scientific methodology that included a thorough analysis of aerial and ground evidence and eye-witness accounts.”

The liberal name-dropping of the CSIR by Chetty and Manuel to give weight and authority to the fire chief’s report and its pine-cone conclusion did not go down well at the parastatal.

The CSIR responded by ordering its Meraka Institute to conduct a full scientific investigation into the start of the western fire. The institute’s confidential report is authored by Dr Philip

The report concludes that the devastating western fire had its origin not in the infamous pine-cone, but in the smouldering fire caused by the lightning strike



The drone image (above) of the smouldering fire (note the surface burn mark) was sent to the municipality on May 27, 11 days before the Great Fire of June 7. Fire Chief Clinton claims this fire only ever burned underground. Right: Eskom scientist Dr Wallace Vosloo

Frost, a senior scientist at the CSIR who heads a group at Meraka called Earth Observation Applications.

This unit’s flagship project is the Advanced Fire Information System (Afis), which uses state-of-the-art technology to provide fire managers across the globe with information about the prediction, detection, monitoring and assessment of wildfires. Using a portfolio of polar orbiting and geostationary satellites to provide near real-time detection of global fire events, Afis specifically allows for the early detection of lightning-caused fires.

Noseweek can reveal that the Meraka Institute report concludes that the devastating western fire had its origin not in the infamous pine-cone, but in the smouldering fire caused by the lightning strike.

This dramatic news, with its far-reaching implications, is revealed by Jean du Plessis, a Pretoria attorney who represents fire victim Dr Wallace



Vosloo and a dozen other uninsured Elandskraal residents who lost their homes in the June 7 inferno.

“I can tell you, I’ve seen it (the Meraka Institute report),” says Du Plessis. “It supports our view – the view that we’ve always held – that the fire didn’t emanate from humans being in that area; it emanated from that area that was smouldering for six (sic) weeks.”

So the report’s author, Dr Philip Frost, concluded that the origin of the western fire was the long-smouldering underground fire? “Yes,” says Du Plessis.

Can he remember any detail about Frost’s conclusion? “I can remember a lot,” says the attorney. “I’m just not going to disclose it. I don’t want to

embarrass Philip.”

The attorney’s disclosure means that, far from the CSIR’s supplying scientific evidence to substantiate fire chief Manuel’s pine-cone theory, its world-famous Meraka Institute had concluded that the fire’s origin was the much-spurned lightning strike.

This has enormous legal ramifications. A smouldering fire, ignored for eight weeks by the fire departments, opens the way for insurance companies to launch class actions for negligence of up to R4 billion against the relevant municipalities and their fire departments. Insurers Santam, alone, face claims from fire victims totalling more than R700m.

Jean du Plessis has served “Section 3” notices on Knysna Municipality and Eden District Municipality of the Elandskraal community’s intention to institute a R21-million damages claim for the failure of their fire departments to extinguish the western fire and prevent it from spreading, re-igniting or becoming uncontrollable. (Section 3 of the Institution of Legal Proceedings Against Certain Organs of State Act requires notice of legal proceedings to be given within six months of an event or debt falling due).

After Du Plessis told *Noseweek* about the Meraka Institute’s investigation and its shock conclusion, there was apparently a dialogue between the attorney and the institute’s Philip Frost. An email arrived from Du Plessis explaining that Frost’s report had not been given to him; he was merely allowed to scan through a draft electronic copy on a CSIR computer in order to confirm that the information supplied to the CSIR scientists by Elandskraal residents was

“used within context”.

“Whether the CSIR agrees with the views held by our clients is neither here nor there,” says a now back-peddalling Du Plessis. “We have other information which does not fall within the scope of expertise of the CSIR, which confirms our clients’ views that the so-called Knysna fire originated from the lightning strike which smouldered for weeks in Elandskraal.

“Having spoken to the CSIR recently, I would propose that you go as far as to indicate that the CSIR prepared a report which will probably go a long way to assist in confirming the origin of the Knysna fire, whichever theory it then confirms, if any.

“I do however confirm that our clients are confident, given the information they have, that the fire which smouldered in Elandskraal for weeks, is the fire that burnt down the Elandskraal community and most probably from there spread to Knysna.”

Noseweek then put the question to the Meraka Institute’s Dr Philip Frost: “As I understand it, you have concluded that the origin of the western fire was a smouldering fire caused by a lightning strike?” The CSIR’s senior scientist replied: “Well, we’re not allowed to say that yet because we haven’t released the official report. That will happen in early January. We’ll have a press briefing. There’s going to be an official report so then you will be able to see all the gory details. I’ve been specifically told not to make any disclosures before we do an official press briefing.”

Frost added: “We’ve disclosed certain things to the provincial disaster management group, but that was also in confidence. It’s an internal

matter at this point. You know about the sensitivities. I’m a scientist and it’s not because I don’t want people to know what’s going on. But it’s become quite a big issue and we’ve been dragged into this thing from the get-go in the wrong way and I’ve had to write reports to look into what was really going on.”

So just what was the CSIR’s involvement in the Knysna fire chief’s “scientific” investigation? “There was a meeting,” says Frost. “We helped Mr Manuel to identify the location of where the drone footage was, to confirm that there was a drone that flew over an area where there was a smouldering patch. That was our only contribution to his report.

“We weren’t even aware of the drone imagery. Manuel showed us a drone image and we helped to identify the location of the footage by comparing it to satellite information. At that point we had no information about anything that was going on. Only subsequent to Manuel’s findings did we do a full analysis which included satellite information, drone information, weather information. That’s what we produced for our report.”

Philip Frost then revealed: “There’s a lot of new information that’s come to light which was not available when Manuel did his report.”

Was the CSIR annoyed at its name being misused by Chetty and Manuel at the August 14 media briefing?

“No,” says Frost, “I think it was just the context that needed to be set right, what we contributed, which was not clear. But we weren’t annoyed. It was just a case of making clear what our contribution was.

“We look at satellite information



and from that point do an analysis. But we are not forensic experts. Show me a pine cone and I cannot comment on that. We have never commented on that part. We have contributed spatial information (data with direct or indirect reference to a specific location or geographical area).

“There was never an endorsement, an official endorsement, from the CSIR. It will come out in the press briefing what our specific contribution is and was. And hopefully – we don’t know, but maybe – it will even be a joint press briefing with Knysna Municipality. There are a lot of internal meetings that still need to take place.”

Knysna’s municipal manager Kam Chetty, 58, was appointed Knysna’s municipal manager last July, a month after the Great Fire. He was previously with Oudtshoorn Municipality, where he was appointed administrator in 2015 to restore proper governance and a turnaround strategy in the town struck by financial and infrastructure crisis.

Clinton Manuel, who started his career as a fire fighter in Cape Town in 1988, was appointed fire chief in Knysna three years ago and as such was in charge of the Knysna joint operations centre throughout the Great Fire. In a rundown of Manuel’s career, Chetty said the fire chief had been involved in a number of major forensic fire investigations in the Cape. “All have gone unchallenged or, where they were challenged, his version was sustainable,” said Chetty. “So his conclusions have been verified and stood the test of a lot of interrogation and we have utmost confidence in his professional ability.”

Chetty said the municipality desperately needed the media’s assistance to dispel “myths” flooding social media on the cause of the fire (inspired by Dr Wallace Vosloo’s reported lightning-strike theory).

In his PowerPoint presentation, fire chief Manuel made much of the presence of pine cones that he said acted as a firelighter for whoever lit the fire in the Elandskraal forest clearing. This he considered to be vital evidence of a man-made fire, since he said there were no pine trees in the area.

In his written report Manuel concludes: “The pine cone with



Knysna fire chief Clinton Manuel (above); and forensic scientist Dr David Klatzow



convinced about the pine-cone theory. That farm used to be an old pine plantation and there’s still the odd pine there. I know there are pine cones there because we sent people to walk around there and have a look.”

● *Why, readers may ask, has the CSIR been holding back publication of the secret report of its Meraka Institute into the Great Fire, with its conclusion by senior scientist Dr Philip Frost, that its cause was an underground fire that was ignited by lightning and left smouldering for eight weeks?*

A neglected smouldering fire opens the door to what the Knysna council is desperate to avoid – massive damages claims against the municipality and its fire department. But as Noseweek’s report states, the law dictates that notice of any litigation must be served within six months.

In the case of the Great Fire, the deadline was December 6. Was the CSIR, which according to Frost gave advance sight of its confidential findings to the provincial disaster management group, prevailed upon to hold back the release of its devastating report until the December deadline had safely passed? – Ed. ■

stacked heavy fuel is the most probable cause of this devastating fire. There exists no other explanation for this fuel to be stacked in this way, other than someone lighting a fire in that clearing in the early hours of 7 June or late evening of 6 June 2017. This fire becomes a new fire which is above ground and exposed to the wind. It had all the dry fuel in its path to quickly become a runaway fire.”

The Elandskraal community’s attorney Jean du Plessis comments: “I’ve spoken to a lot of fire experts and I don’t think anybody is really

Hell hath no fury like a sequestrated ex-wife

Divorce of wealthy couple leaves ex-wife almost destitute – but she holds a trump card. By Jonathan Erasmus

THE EX-WIFE OF A PROMINENT Vryheid pig farmer has won an almost five-year battle against liquidators after she was sequestrated and left without a penny to her name.

The formidable team of seasoned liquidators, represented by the insolvency department of Africa's largest law firm ENS, includes Pietermaritzburg liquidator Pierre Berrangé, ENS liquidation specialist Adam Lombard and Pietermaritzburg auctioneer Peter Maskell – all were outmanoeuvred by divorcee Renata Volker.

From the outset, Renata maintained that the liquidation of the family business that she and ex-husband Thomas Volker once owned was nothing more than a sham put in motion by Thomas and his team of "legal hitmen-for-hire" plus a bit of help from his bankers, First National Bank and First Rand Bank. Their aim, says Renata, was to make sure she got nothing in the divorce settlement – a claim her ex-husband and Berrangé deny.

In November, after the liquidators had been in occupation of the family farm for four years and had made numerous attempts to seize and sell it, they hurriedly vacated the property after Renata obtained a court interdict forbidding them to sell any more equipment from the farm to fund their fees.

Berrangé and team now face the very real possibility of a damages claim and have already been reported to the Master of the High Court, while Maskell has been reported to the South African Council for the Property Valuers Profession.



Thomas Volker with new wife Monika

Court records spread over several years and in multiple courts from Paulspetersburg to Pretoria and Pietermaritzburg – reveal how Thomas Volker devised a strategy with Berrangé and his divorce lawyer, Gert Vonkeman, along with KwaZulu-Natal Advocate Eddie Lotz, to dismantle his family business, Penvaan Group of Companies, and – as Renata has consistently maintained – leave his ex-wife with nothing.

The audacious plan might have worked had it not been for a simple oversight that neither bank, liquidator nor pig farmer could overcome. Renata had control of the family trust, and the trust owned all the land where the main family business operated.

The significant point is that the trust had no debt so could not be liquidated to force the sale of the farm. The land could only change hands if the trust agreed to sell. It was practically



Renata Mignon Volker

impossible to sell the business separately from the land as all the houses, piggeries and other farm buildings, worth millions of rands, were firmly fixed to the land. All potential buyers of the business were only prepared to buy from Berrangé on condition that

The audacious plan might have worked had it not been for a simple oversight that neither bank, liquidator nor pig farmer could overcome

they also got the land.

What was and is essentially a family feud began as far back as 2010 when Thomas wanted to divorce Renata after he found a new love interest in local Vryheid resident Monika Bates.

All along Renata maintained that the liquidation was a sham, a claim her ex-husband and Berrangé have denied.

“Thomas deliberately liquidated the companies in order to avoid paying me my share of the Joint Estate and maintenance. He colluded with Mr Berrangé, one of the joint liquidators, to have the companies liquidated in the hope of buying them back cheaply.”

Renata accuses Maskell of having deliberately and illegally undervalued both immovable and movable property and of being a front for her ex-husband, to allow him to “buy back” the Volk’s business assets.

Prior to the divorce and liquidation the family ran successful piggeries, a meat wholesale business and a feed manufacturing plant. They reared cattle, grew timber and also owned several farms and properties in Pretoria and Cape Town. The annual turnover was approximately R100 million. Their assets were in excess of R80m and their liabilities were about R40m.

The matrimonial home was a R10m mansion which they had built with the intention of eventually turning it into a boutique hotel. Renata continues to live in it.

By early 2013 the couple’s divorce proceedings were winding up. Thomas was in talks with his divorce attorney Gert Vonkeman, accountant Guy McEwan and Advocate Eddie Lotz. It is through these meetings that Thomas and his advisors decided to liquidate the family business, a process they initiated by sending what was dubbed “the suicide letter” to ENS, the major law firm that then represented First National Bank and First Rand Bank – the company’s biggest creditors – asking them to wind up the businesses.

The lawyer in ENS’s liquidations department (headed by Leonard “Lennie the Liquidator” Katz) who handled the matter, was Adam Lombard, who often writes a column about liquidations that is syndicated in newspapers belonging to the Independent Media group.

The letter painted a grim picture

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of the group's flagship businesses, Penvaan Feeds and Penvaan Estates, which manufactured animal feed, had timber plantations and farmed pigs. These were key businesses in the integrated group. The letter stated that these two companies owed the creditors R28,5m and owed FNB a further R25m.

It said that if the bank didn't act quickly, the fate of 4,000 pigs hung in the balance, as there was no money to feed them and other creditors might obtain court orders against the group.

"We have so advised the joint director of the companies, TW Volker, that the circumstances set forth hereunder will have a negative effect on the exposure of FNB, the security of FNB and the recovery of the debt of the said two companies by FNB", read Vonkeman's letter.

"By virtue of the above-mentioned facts, we believe the position of the companies to be extremely precarious," said the letter.

On 19 March 2013 FNB rushed to attach Penvaan Feeds and Penvaan Estates – other businesses in the group were added at a later stage – and launched an urgent court application for the liquidation of the companies.

On 22 March 2013 the North Gauteng High Court placed the companies into provisional liquidation and by that afternoon Pierre Berrangé wrote a letter to the Master of the High Court to be appointed liquidator. Five days later he provided the Master with a R20m surety bond to secure his appointment as liquidator of the companies and on 6 May 2013 the liquidation order was made final.

Prior to receiving the "suicide letter", FNB had given no indication that they were contemplating putting the companies into liquidation.

Renata's assertion that the liquidation was unnecessary and was deliberately manufactured to cut her out of her share in the divorce is given credence through several incidents preceding and shortly after the liquidation.

On 23 February 2013, a month before the surprise liquidation was set in motion, the Penvaan Group had been offered R24m by the Department of Rural Development and Land Affairs for one of their businesses that was based on another farm. It was part of

a land claim by the Zagila Community. The state was willing to make the purchase an order of the court. Renata had been keen to make the sale, Thomas had not.

When the companies were placed under provisional liquidation, KZN valuer Alan Stephenson who had been contracted by Renata's divorce lawyers to undertake valuations of the company's fixed assets, informed Berrangé about the government offer. But Berrangé ignored it, only to resurrect it eight months later after the final liquidation order, and sold for R23,4m, earning a sizable fee from the sale. If this sale had been concluded when Berrangé was first informed, Renata believes the entire liquidation could have been halted.

Furthermore it later became evident to both Renata and Thomas that Berrangé's chosen auctioneer Maskell had a penchant for undervaluing their assets.

In April 2016 Thomas told two creditors in a recorded meeting that Berrangé and Maskell "screwed" him out of his fleet of vehicles by drastically under-selling them. He also claimed they had made half the value disappear.

"Berrangé and them [*sic*] took irresu-

They said hundreds of pigs would have to be euthanized, the SPCA would become involved and I was being unreasonable in refusing to sell the trust property

larly for themselves. I can bring a case against them because it is actually my money that they have stolen," Thomas told the creditors.

Nevertheless with the liquidation in motion Berrangé and Thomas had a big problem: without the trust's land the liquidation value was limited. They needed control of the trust.

The second problem was that, while the trust had three trustees, namely Renata, Thomas, and an independent from Pretoria called Johannes de Witt, De Witt always voted with Renata, giving her control of the trust.

Renata stated in court papers that she was approached by Berrangé and Thomas "on more than one occasion, [*to say*] that if we did not agree to the disposal of the trust property, hundreds of pigs would have to be euthanized, that the SPCA would have to become involved and that I was being unreasonable and unrealistic in refusing to sell the trust property".

She said no.

So to get around this problem first FNB, through ENS, tried to liquidate the trust, claiming it had signed surety over the companies being wound up. However in March 2014 Pietermaritzburg High Court Judge Poyo Dlwati said Thomas was the only trustee who had signed the suretyship on behalf of the trust and therefore it was not binding.

Then eight months later, Berrangé brought a high court application against the trust, claiming it had been unfairly enriched to the value of R16,46m by the company's improvements on the land. This matter still hasn't been finalised.

Then in February 2016 a third option arose: sequester Renata, effectively removing her as trustee of the trust. Thomas would gain control and sell the land – or at least that was the plan.

The trust, in the meantime, had turned to the courts, claiming the liquidators were in illegal occupation of the land, having never paid a rental and wanting them evicted. This matter too has yet to be concluded.

Due to the nature of the tit-for-tat legal wrangle that has dragged on since 2013, FNB at one stage obtained a cost order against Renata for R181,100. It was for this that they decided to sequester her.

Renata was broke. She had not

received an income for several years and Thomas had reneged on the maintenance order, claiming poverty despite it being common knowledge that he was still working under the guise of another company registered in the name of his new love (and now, wife) Monika Bates.

Renata claimed that by 2016 Thomas owed her at least R600,000.

Berrangé, who rubbished Renata's multiple claims, blamed her for her own misfortune. "It does not lie in the mouth of [Renata] to complain that she has no income and no means of support, taking into account her outrageous and unreasonable demands. She is and remains the author of her own misfortune," he told the court.

Renata had wanted half the estate and had obtained a R20,000-a-month maintenance order from Thomas, which he never paid.

Berrangé said that, had Renata "adopted a reasonable and common-sense attitude during the divorce proceedings", her sequestration would not have happened.

Thomas admitted at the April 2016 creditors' meeting that the sequestration was less about the debt owed and more about gaining control of the trust. He said it was "good news" that "FNB brought an application to have my ex-wife sequestered".

Once she was removed as trustee, he said, he'd call a meeting with De Witt (the Pretoria trustee) and they would vote on the sale of the farm. Thomas said he had a casting vote and if this wasn't successful he had a new trustee lined up. "That was the whole idea why they sequestered her," said Thomas.

After initially opposing the move, Renata was sequestered in March 2017.

In her "Statement of Debtors Affairs" submitted to the court Renata said "my ex-husband and Pierre Berrangé have left me with the clothes that I wear and some jewellery which is of little value".

"The reason for my insolvency is that my ex-husband TW Volker colluded with Adv Eddie Lotz, Attorneys Gert Vonkeman and Adam Lombard of ENS, Accountant Guy McEwan and various officials of FNB and FRB, to sequester the Penvaan group of companies of which my ex-husband and I were joint directors."

But Thomas and Berrangé never gained control of the trust. The trust deed stipulated that family must be appointed, so Thomas and Renata's three sons were duly nominated in about August 2017. They too begrudged their father, and siding with their mother, chose not to vote for his sale proposals.

Instead, on 3 November 2017, the trust successfully moved to obtain an interdict stopping Maskell and Berrangé from selling any more assets, including the 130 hectares of timber on the farm. In the interdict they raised the issue of the liquidators' not paying any rent and that their occupation of the farm was illegal.

This interdict was a mortal blow. Knowing the game was up, and keen to safeguard the R20m suretyship they had given the Master of the High Court, Berrangé and ENS decided on immediately exiting the farm.

A week later, on 13 November, Lombard informed the trust lawyers Shepstone and Wylie that they would vacate the premises by 18 November, which would involve the "disconnection of the electricity". He said any claims that they had damaged the properties had "no basis for any such claims" as had been raised by valuer Stephenson in previous correspondence.

Estelle de Wet from Shepstone and Wylie called the liquidators' action of cutting off the electricity a "grave inconvenience" which had left Renata, literally living in the dark.

"This conduct is not only grossly unreasonable but is clearly calculated to make life as difficult as possible for our client who, to your client's knowledge, lives on the property and whose safety will now be at risk," said De Wet.

Lombard's response: "Our clients' conduct is not aimed at making your client's life difficult. The disconnection of the electricity is only aimed at minimising the costs of administration. We therefore suggest that your client makes arrangements to begin paying for her own consumption".

De Wet replied: "There is no point in debating this issue with you. The fact remains that two days' notice cannot possibly be considered to be reasonable in any circumstances, and the only inference to be drawn is that your clients intended to inconvenience our client as much as possible." ■



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Nowhere to go but up

A young Afrikaans woman from the Cape today stars as an MP for the Inkatha Freedom Party, long seen as a political home for Zulu nationalists. Sue Segar reports on Liezl van der Merwe's mission to fight for justice – with the social grants fiasco top of her list

FP MP LIEZL VAN DER MERWE believes that Social Development Minister Bathabile Dlamini is playing a “critical endgame” aimed at making it impossible for the South African Post Office to take over the payment of social grants – all so that she can keep Cash Paymaster Services (CPS) in the picture at all costs.

“She has completely engineered this crisis, again,” says Van der Merwe, referring to recent delays in finalising a deal with the Post Office.

“There is talk that she’s involved in the establishment of another company which will be waiting in the wings to take over from CPS, with the same individuals benefiting as before. Her endgame is to delay any progress until April so that this new company can take over in minutes. Time is running out and the Post Office doesn’t even have the green light yet to start working on this properly. That is my real fear,” says Van der Merwe when interviewed by *Noseweek*.

“People are now breaking ranks to get this information out. Dlamini is still hellbent on making it impossible for the Post Office, so she can keep CPS. More and more people are speaking out, saying ‘enough is enough’. But it might take a year for us to get to the bottom of this. She should go to jail.”

Van der Merwe, along with fellow opposition MPs, has been on her feet in Parliament time and time again asking questions about social-grant contracts. She does not hesitate to describe CPS as “a bunch of crooks” in committee meetings and during debates.



Liezl van der Merwe flanked by Inkatha Deputy President Inkosi Mzamo Buthelezi (left) and IFP MP Mkhuleko Hlengwa

“Let’s be frank, Bathabile Dlamini has done everything she can in the past seven months to block the Post Office from playing a role in distributing social grants. Now she is being forced to work with them, but we have fewer than 90 working days left to sort this process out. Even the Auditor General has asked how it could be reasonably possible for the Post Office to take over in such a short time-frame. And they

are still negotiating.

“I don’t think that the leadership of our country realises how much panic and frustration this has caused to those who rely on the grants as their only lifeline. The panic among pensioners is alarming, but Bathabile Dlamini doesn’t care.”

Van der Merwe has good reason to be concerned about social grants – her own grandmother is one of the millions

of social-grant recipients in South Africa. “Obviously I help out, but if the money doesn’t go into her account, she will be kicked out of her home. She won’t have food or a roof over her head. Bathabile Dlamini is playing with the lives of our grandmothers.”

Van der Merwe spends many weekends in rural KwaZulu-Natal addressing these and other concerns of the poor and vulnerable. She also receives more than 25 emails a day from worried people who are unsure of what’s going on with their social grants.

“Through the government’s absolute mismanagement of this process, there is virtually mass panic among pensioners about whether they will be paid on 1 April 2018. While all these high-level negotiations go on, nobody is communicating with the people on the ground. They just hear that there is no deal and that they might not get their grants. There is real fear.

“There is also the issue of the cards, with many people believing they will expire on 31 December 2017, and yet nobody is communicating with them. I am making it my business to assure them that the cards will work and they will get their grants in one way or another. People in their eighties are telling me, ‘this is the only money I have got, if I don’t get it, I won’t eat’.

Then there’s the problem of ongoing illegal deductions from social grants. “I would say that about 90% of people have been affected by illegal deductions, based on the number of affidavits I have received,” says Van der Merwe. “It’s one thing to put a stop to illegal deductions and another to get the money back. Once we have stabilised the Post Office’s takeover of the grants payment system, we should launch a court case, go after CPS and sue them for money taken from grant recipients illegally. We must make sure it goes back to the recipients, not those CPS crooks who took money from the government through an illegal contract and then stole poor people’s money.

“It’s astonishing that Minister Bathabile Dlamini knew these people were profiting from an illegal contract and yet enabled them to steal from the poor. How can a person like that occupy such a senior position?

“She symbolises everything that’s wrong with the ANC and with South

Africa today. She is unapproachable, rude and dismissive. She insults people when she doesn’t want to answer questions. She’s shown complete disregard for the Constitutional Court and for grant recipients. She is untouchable.”

The social grants fiasco is just another blight of the Zuma presidency – but Van der Merwe is optimistic about the future of South Africa.

“We have reached a very low point. Jacob Zuma’s leadership has brought our country to its knees. But we will get out of this. I think things will get worse towards 2019 but in 2019, whether we end-up with a government under the leadership of Cyril Ramaphosa or under an opposition leader, that is when we will start to turn the country around, back to the rainbow nation we are supposed to be.

“There is light at the end of the tunnel. That’s what excites me. I dream of a better future in South Africa, where there is no Bathabile Dlamini.”

The 2019 elections, she believes, will allow younger leaders to come forward and shine. “There is a real possibility that the DA breaks past 30%, and that both the EFF and the IFP grow. Then we have a real possibility that between our three parties, along with smaller opposition parties, we could offer the country the opportunity of an opposition government. It is not a far-fetched idea. The great thing about opposition politics today is that we are younger and hardworking and that is so good for democracy.”

Van der Merwe has “the utmost respect” for both DA leader Mmusi Maimane and EFF leader Julius

**The 2019 elections,
Van der Merwe
believes, will allow
younger leaders to
come forward
and shine**

Malema, as well as SACP central committee member and Deputy Minister of Higher Education Buti Manamela.

“Buti is a great orator and a wonderful person. We hang out and talk politics. And I am a great admirer of Julius Malema because he speaks truth to power. We should never under-estimate the arrival of the EFF into politics. Malema has shown us it’s okay to be young, bold and brave and to speak truth to power. I find him highly intellectual. I don’t support all the EFF’s policies – like those on land – but we will navigate those issues when we get to that point.

“I also really respect Maimane for the way he conducts himself – always in the best interests of our country. He is so brave and young and has great skills as an orator. It can’t be easy running an opposition party under these circumstances. He has a lot on his shoulders.

“The main issue among young South Africans is that so many talented, liberated young people are simply not able to find a job. Wherever I go, young people come to me and tell me they don’t have a job. The greatest challenge for us as leaders is to ensure we get the economy going so young people with passion and talent are able to live their dreams and make a contribution.”

Van der Merwe also relates to those students struggling to get through higher education. “One of my abiding memories is that after I had completed my diploma in journalism, I went home and told my mother I wanted to study to be a lawyer.

She said: ‘There is no money. Your step-dad’s business has collapsed. You’ve just had a loan for your diploma. You won’t be able to get another one. Your only option is to go and work.’ That was the most devastating moment of my life. That is why the issue of Fees Must Fall resonates strongly with me, that child standing in the kitchen crying.”

Van der Merwe describes herself as an obsessively hard worker. “I love this country and am passionately committed to being part of building South Africa.

“Coming from a staunch Afrikaans background and realising the mistakes we have made in our past, I feel what I do is a calling, not a job.” ■

Itching to get into politics

LIEZL VAN DER MERWE WAS BORN IN 1980 in the working class suburb of Goodwood, Cape Town. Her father, Rikus Faasen, was in and out of jobs and her mother, Linda, who didn't have a matric, juggled two or three jobs at a time to support the family.

"On top of that, she looked after me and did all the housework. My parents divorced when I was about three. I lived with my mom in a little flat in Parow East, near the train station. Sometimes we had just enough money for half a loaf of bread. There were always issues around maintenance. At the time, I thought my mother was rendered weak by our situation – and I'm sure that's why my priority in my work is to fight for women's rights.

From an early age, Van der Merwe wanted to change the world. "I would see powerful people on television, while watching my mother struggling. I decided early on that I'd become a politician or a lawyer."

When Liezl was ten years old her mother remarried and decided to have daughter's name changed to that of her stepfather, Van der Merwe. She recalls that as a child, she was always asking her parents to buy her books on politics. "My step-dad would say, 'is there something wrong with this child, doesn't she want a toy or something?'"

While in high school Van der Merwe was reading about Nelson Mandela, Mangosuthu Buthelezi and other political figures. "I was completely infatuated with Madiba and I have all his books. I read Maya Angelou poems a lot. I read a lot about Winston Churchill because I like his wit and I was always inspired by Barack Obama's approach to people."

She attended Paarl Gimnasium High School – "an excellent school where I made many friends". She became a top athlete, and earned Boland and Western Province colours for running. She still loves sport.

Having served as deputy head girl of the school and the boarding school, Van der Merwe matriculated in 1998.

The first time she witnessed injus-

tice, was when a young coloured girl arrived at the school in about 1996. "She was not made to feel welcome. It made me feel angry."

When Van der Merwe was 16, her mother developed bad depression and tried to commit suicide. "That was when my struggles really started. By the time I was in my mid-twenties, her depression had manifested in many forms of mental illness.

"I was all she had... she got divorced from my stepfather and my life started revolving around looking after my mother – to ensure she was eating and that she had a roof over her head."

Van der Merwe got a loan to study for a diploma in Journalism at City Varsity, Cape Town, and did a few

other language and Public Relations courses before working as a sub-editor for various online publications in the 2000s. She moved to London in 2005 and joined ITV as a communications officer and later, communications room manager.

Whilst working in London, she realised she was itching to get into politics. She responded to an advertisement for a media job with the IFP and got the job. "At the time we weren't expected to take-up IFP membership, but because I had already read about Prince Mangosuthu Buthelezi and his stance on things. I felt it could be a political home for me. I have now found my political home and have been blessed by the journey."

Lure of IFP was its proud track record

THE IFP, THIRD-LARGEST OF THE opposition parties, played a leading role during Codesa, the negotiations to end apartheid, in particular in advocating for the need for provinces. The IFP favours federalism, believing that power should be in the hands of people at grassroots level.

"This is a philosophy I share," says Liezl van der Merwe. "It was also the IFP that tabled the need for a Bill of Rights to be included in the Constitution.

"The ANC failed to see the need for it, believing that a democratic government would never infringe on the rights of its people.

"The IFP approached constitutional negotiations from a different angle. While others focused on the details of the transfer of power, the IFP looked ahead to the kind of democracy we were forging. The IFP insisted on discussing issues like the form of state – whether South Africa would be a unitary or a federal state, whether the powers of governance would be centralised or devolved, and how we could create checks and

balances to limit unfettered power that, history has shown, always produces corruption.

"The IFP won several victories at the negotiating table, not least, the inclusion of the Bill of Rights.

"The IFP tabled the need for social and economic rights; a constitutional court; independent organs of state controlling the executive; the recognition of indigenous and customary law; a federal state with provinces; and many other aspects of a modern constitution.

"This is the proud track-record of the IFP that I am pleased to be associated with, and one that ultimately made my decision to join the IFP an easy one.

"Also, upon meeting Prince Buthelezi for the first time in 2006, I was struck by his humility, friendliness, wisdom and his steadfastness in every issue that he tackled.

His leadership, together with the party's proud track-record in fighting for social and economic justice, were the reasons why I took up IFP membership and remain a proud and loyal party member. ■



Liezl van der Merwe with her mother, Linda (above) and (right) holding hands with Mangosuthu Buthelezi at an IFP march

She joined the IFP in 2006, working first as a media officer to the IFP leader Buthelezi and then head of media and research for the IFP caucus. She joined the IFP Youth Brigade and worked her way up in the structures, becoming a Member of Parliament in 2012 at the age of 32. She is serving her second term as an MP in the National Assembly. She is also the IFP Director of Communications and serves on the portfolio committees of Women and Social Development, among others.

Van der Merwe is now studying towards a BA in politics and public administration through Unisa – with a few law subjects thrown in – and consistently achieves A grades.

“Getting to where I am, I sometimes look back and say that I have had a very difficult life. I had to look after a woman who was meant to mother me. Sometimes I would say, ‘why are you so weak?’ She told me she had suffered abuse and today, knowing what I know, I can see what she was struggling with.

“The physical and mental torment some women go through can seriously affect their children. It can rob girls of their education and reduce them



to people who are never able to fulfil their life goals.”

Van der Merwe’s mother died in 2010, before she became an MP in 2012.

“My mother died young. I am sad she didn’t see me become an MP. She became consumed by mental illness. Those years of my life were traumatic. She became my child. So the issues I fight in Parliament are things close to my heart. Issues like empowering women, empowering the girl child, and ensuring that school girls have access to free sanitary towels are critical issues – issues I choose to champion.”

After her biological parents’ divorce, Van der Merwe only met her father again when she turned 18. “Today he lives round the corner from me

in the northern suburbs. I don’t hold grudges. I am not angry. He sends me SMSs saying he is very proud of me.

“Throughout my life, I have had to be a very strong person for myself. My school friends have been there for me throughout my life. In fact, when I made my maiden speech as an MP, I had no family in Parliament; my friends from boarding school were all there. I had always told them that one day I will be an MP and I will make a change in South Africa.”

Her maiden speech took place at a joint sitting for Women’s Day. “I spoke about my mother and the challenges she had faced and how they made me the woman I am today. I said I will always work for women’s issues and the rights of the girl child. That’s how I will spend my time at Parliament.”

On KwaZulu-Natal, the province where most IFP supporters live: “It is not only the beauty of the province, but of the people. It is a beautiful place with beautiful kind, warm people.”

People often ask her why she chose the IFP as her party and not the DA or ANC. “The IFP’s policies are not that different from the DA or ANC. We have well-crafted policies, we only differ from the two main parties mainly on issues around traditional leadership. My loyalty to the IFP is closely linked to my relationship with the president of the party. I believe in the type of South African he is. He has inculcated values in me, like family values, respect, and constructive opposition. I believe that constructive opposition is critical for the growth of this country. It is fine to criticise, but then we must come up with constructive ideas and solutions. I often think that some opposition parties ride on the ANC’s failures without bringing anything new to the table. Also, in the IFP, I have been given much more opportunity to grow.”

On Buthelezi, she says: “I love him very much. With my not having really had a solid family life, the IFP, as a smaller party, has been my family. I was a kid when I joined. It is more than just a political home. I found a family and they have given me opportunities I would never have had otherwise.”

“Prince Buthelezi has been a real father figure to me. Whenever I’ve screwed up, he’s said to me, ‘try again’. When I was once the subject of a negative media article, he said, ‘why are you even worrying about it? I’ve suffered a career of negative publicity’. He’s always been a pillar of strength. He is a man of integrity who works really hard. If he gets a hundred letters, he won’t go to bed until he has responded to every one of them.”

Her “best friend in the world” is fellow IFP MP, Mkhuleko Hlengwa. “We became really close when we were both sworn in and thrown in the deep end as very young MPs. I was 32 and he was 24. We looked at each other and knew we were the new IFP generation and we had to have each other’s backs. We often brainstorm together about the issues we are dealing with or for speeches we are making in Parliament.

“We write all our own stuff as we

don’t have researchers. I offered him a date ball the other day and he said, ‘is this white people’s stuff?’ We joke about the idiosyncrasies of our different backgrounds and this is how we learn from one another’s cultures. I see him every day and he is the closest thing I have to a brother. He often tells me I am a blessing in his life.”

When she’s not working, she spends time with her two pugs. “I am a total dog fanatic. I love walking my dogs. If I am not travelling around South Africa, then I’m at home, walking the dogs, doing fun-runs – or reading; I love political biographies.”

Van der Merwe says her black colleagues initially didn’t understand her obsession with dogs. “We don’t realise how many people are scared of dogs. Hlengwa used to say to me, ‘dogs are for protection’. They should be kept outside. These days, Hlengwa is thinking of getting a small dog for his son. And Princess Irene (Buthelezi’s wife), recently got a new lapdog. The

prince told me the other day it has crept into his heart!”

Home for her is the MPs’ village at Acacia Park.

“My only off time is Christmas. On weekends I travel to KZN. I have bought a small piece of land in Sutherland in the Karoo, where I hope to put up a little house and end up there.

On her own long-term ambitions: “My first big goal is to contest for a leadership position in my party. I see myself in the future as part of the top six leaders in the party so that I can more strategically influence its future. Then, when the day arrives, when there is a government comprised of opposition parties, I hope that whoever leads it considers me for a position in the executive – as a deputy minister or a minister. But I will be willing to serve in any position.

“And, of course, I want to finish that law degree. I will probably be 40 when I get it but that’s okay!” ■

Valuations warrior strikes again

THE TSHWANE CITY COUNCIL LAST year commissioned a new valuation roll, to be valid for calculating property rates applicable from July 2017 until June 2020. Notices were published inviting those who wished to object to any valuation to do so within a prescribed period.

Howick-based rates activist Dr Robert McLaren (*noses* 202, 203, 207, 211 & 215) found reason to file no fewer than 700 objections, most relating to the significant undervaluation of numerous high-end properties and shopping mall complexes. For example, he demonstrates that the well-known Menlyn Park shopping mall, valued on the roll at R3.5 billion, should be valued at R5.9bn, making a huge difference in the amount of rates to be collected. Similarly the Centurion mall valued at R1.7bn, should be paying rates on a valuation of R4bn.

The SA Reserve Bank’s building, valued at R200 million, should be more than double that; similarly the SARS offices in New Muckleneuk.

Bizarrely, the council’s valuations

department responded with a letter clearly calculated to intimidate and discourage him from pursuing these objections. Inter alia he was warned he would not be allowed to rectify or elaborate on any of his objections – and that he should expect to be challenged on the grounds that he had no *locus standi* (legal standing) to make any of these objections, regardless of their merit.

They then quote at length from the Constitution about a citizen’s rights – presumably those wealthy citizens lucky enough to have had their properties undervalued – to lawful and procedurally fair administrative action – ultimately that he will have to satisfy the council that he has a personal interest and is directly affected by each incorrect valuation he is challenging.

His sharp reply: The council’s own regulations say “any person” may object to a valuation; in addition, he argues that, as a citizen, he is entitled to demand all ratepayers carry their fair share of the rates burden.

[To be continued.] ■



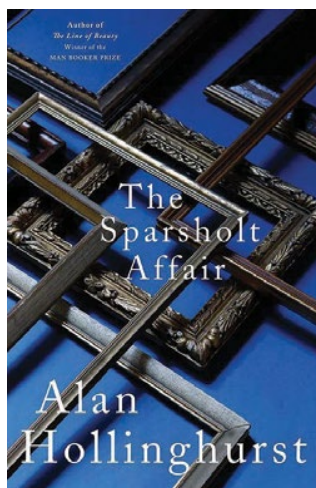
Restrained depiction. Unrestrained activities

ALAN HOLLINGHURST CREATED SOMETHING of a stir in literary circles with his first novel, *The Swimming-Pool Library*, at the time (1988) one of the first explicitly, indeed graphically, gay novels to demand to be taken seriously as literature, as much by its elegant style as by its setting – upper middle-class London – and its characters – upper middle-class Londoners, with a fair deal of rough trade in supporting roles. This blend of the urbanely sophisticated and the outright scurrilous continued in Hollinghurst's three next novels, the second of which, *The Line of Beauty*, receiving the ultimate stamp of literary approval by winning the Man Booker Prize in 2004. Then, in *The Stranger's Child*, the novel preceding the one under review, Hollinghurst once again dismayed the literary world, this time by being almost coyly reserved in his depiction of matters sexual, though his characters were as active as ever, if only off-stage.

Now, in this novel, Hollinghurst once again favours a more restrained depiction of the unrestrained activities of his characters, with just here and there a startlingly intimate glance at the physical realities underlying the opulent style. The novel extends over three generations, from 1940 to 2012, taking in the War, the Coal Miners' Strike of the 70s, and then the sexual freedoms of the 90s (with, perhaps oddly, no mention of the Aids crisis of the late 80s and 90s). Throughout, Hollinghurst deploys, not to say displays, his superb responsiveness to the look, the feel, the smell, the texture of places, whether as a triumph of observation, research or imagination. His evocation of wartime Oxford, which he could not have experienced, is as vivid as any of the more contemporary settings: "Now the lane was a little black canyon, its gabled and chimneyed rim just visible to us against the deep charcoal of the sky." But in a later section, a file of cars at a traffic light is observed with the same minute attention: "The lights changed, the slow release of inertia passed backward through the crowd of cars."

The texture of the writing is so rich that at

THE SPARSHOLT AFFAIR
By Alan Hollinghurst
(Picador)



times it almost obscures the merely human characters, and it is perhaps a drawback of the time lapses in the novel (there are five sections, spread out over the novel's six decades) that there is little sense of continuity of character: figures come and go with disconcerting abruptness. The pleasure lies not in following the fortunes of a single character or set of characters, but in tracing a kind of hidden design, what Anthony Powell called *A Dance to the Music of Time*, in which the characters, without intending or realising it, participate. Thus towards the end of the novel, Johnny, the gay artist son of David Sparsholt, eponym of the famous *Affair*, reflects, as he walks his 74-year-old father away from a long-delayed visit to Evert Dax, the man he had briefly loved in Oxford in 1940, on the "irony, or anyway oddity, of these two father-figures having long ago been friends, and then, astonishingly, lovers". To add to the irony or oddity, Dax is the present lover of Ivan, an ex-lover of Johnny's. The concealed pattern of the past thus sometimes unexpectedly reveals itself, either enrichingly, as here, or inexorably, as in the *Affair* that ruins Johnny's father's career and haunts Johnny's youth and adulthood.

Indeed, it is part of Hollinghurst's mastery of his vast material (at 454 pages, this is a very long novel), that all or most of the apparently disparate strands of the novel do ultimately form a richly satisfying, beautifully worked tapestry. But if it is a novel much concerned with memory (two important allusions in the novel are to memoirs and to portrait-painting, two kinds of record-keeping), the last section, "Consolations", attempts to imagine also a liberation from the patterns of the past: on one hand, through the marriage of Lucy, Johnny's daughter-by-donation, and then through Johnny's meeting with the irrepressible young Zé. The future, though uncertain, seems for the moment untrammelled by the past – though here, too, in the portrait that Johnny is painting of Lucy, he notes "the eyes the blue-grey (he saw it at last) of her dead grandfather's". ■

Letter from Umjindi

BHEKI MASHILE



Zimbabwe. Nothing like a good coup

AS I PUNCH AWAY AT MY KEYBOARD writing this piece, I must say I am in very good spirits. So what if the recent heavy rains we've been enjoying passed through my farm with winds that resembled a hurricane instead of a downpour – and said rains made half the corrugated iron on my shed look like a crushed soda can. So what, as the brothers in the States would say, “siiit, ain't nothing but a chicken wing”. A chicken wing? Huh. I have to pay to have this “siiit” repaired.

As an African, I'm tempted to blame this corrugated crush on witchcraft, however, I think it's mother nature paying me back, on behalf of this-here-Nosey's admin guru Nicci, for my quip: “Don't worry about your drought in the Cape, I'll send you a bottle of water”. Well who's laughing now?

Hey I'm laughing cause it ain't nothing but a chicken wing, definitely not with my Uncle Bob to put a smile on my face.

So sad that our liberator of Ian Smith's racist Rhodesia ended up becoming a power obsessed buffoon. In fact my joy is not just from Uncle Bob but the highly entertaining event in which he was the star attraction, the November 14 “coup” launched by his once-loyal military brass. See what happens when you let the brass get dull or, in Uncle Bob's case, relegate it to a bunch of toy soldiers?

Yes, yes it's over, and Uncle has come to his senses and stepped down. But hey, his insistence on holding on to power resulting in the army's action made my day, brought back some fond memories. But will get to that at the end.

There is one thing about journalism that I despise: with experience, one develops a very strong sense of observation. In other words, when a journalist comes across the slightest

information that is of public interest, it stays with them. Then one day, unexpectedly, the journo is reminded of that issue and simply cannot walk away without looking into it.

Sometime in the not-too-distant past my doctor was giving me healthy eating advice and one of the things he warned me to stay away from was mielie meal. Maize. Argh! not a problem there, I am a pasta and rice man anyway. However, I've never turned my nose up at porridge when it's offered.

The reason my good doctor raised the red flag on the nation's staple was because of GMOs (Genetically Modified Organisms), the organism in this case being the maize seed. So I'll be conducting my own research on why one should shy away from it – perhaps I'll get round to it some time in 2018.

In the mean time, recently, while buying mielie meal to have on hand for guests, I was struck by a warning label on the packaging. It said “may contain genetically modified ingredients”.

May? My immediate reaction (that journalistic response I despise) was: “Well I'll be damned, this is what the good doctor was talking about. Surely there must be some substance to his caution or this warning would not be on this packaging”. But herein lies the problem: the majority of people who are the largest consumers of mielie meal will not have a clue as to what GMO is – that is, if they notice or pay attention to the warning at all.

This creates a serious dilemma for a journo like myself whose Umjindi Guardian community newspaper was dedicated to informing the public about issues such as this. Surely, with the *Nose* having written about it in the past, and now my bringing it up again, is not going to reach the most vulner-

able members of our population.

However, not all needs to be lost. This, here *Nose* is read by policymakers, so when we again publish findings on the risks of GMO, the Department of Health will hopefully take the responsibility of widely informing the public. A public that is now being cautioned about the very product they live on day in and day out.

How important is this information? Well, I recently read that South Africa is the only country in Sub-Saharan Africa that has allowed Genetically Modified maize. All other countries have shied away from it. Why? When I asked the good doctor what the risks were, he said: “too much you will need to research, but one thing I can tell you is there has been an increase in illnesses such as kidney failure among this country's black population, regular consumers of pap”.

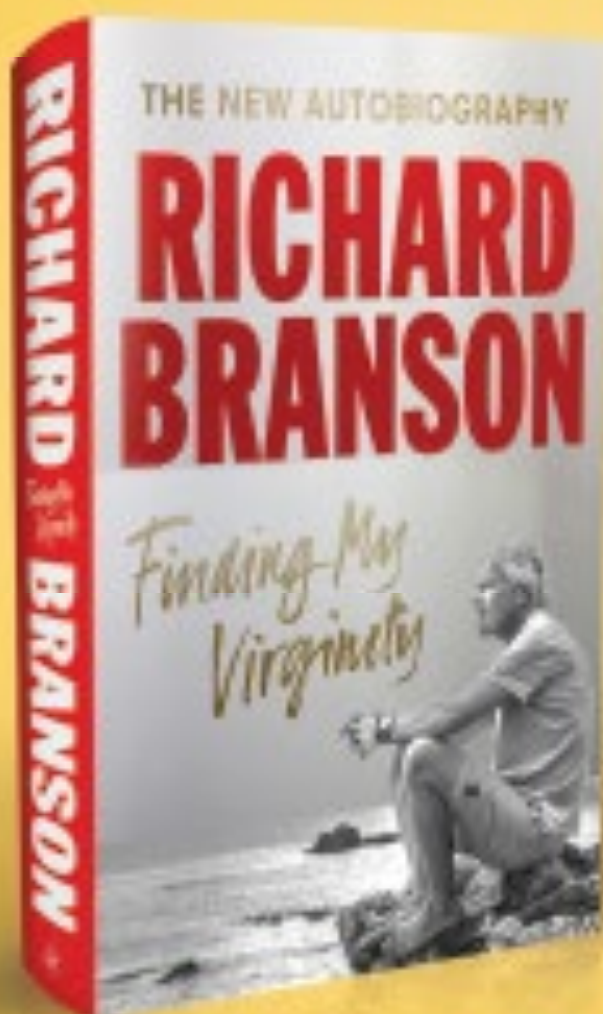
Nosey ones, clearly this (GMO) thing cannot be cast aside as, “ain't nothing but a chicken wing”.

Back to Uncle Bob. Well there is nothing like a good coup – tanks rolling, a leader shown shell-shocked, people celebrating – to make a news broadcast captivating entertainment. This scribe regularly enjoyed such entertainment in the seventies on American news broadcasts. Man oh man, the seventies were definitely the decade of coups. But they were always in distant lands far flung from New York. So, for it to happen right next door in Zim made one feel right in the middle of the action.

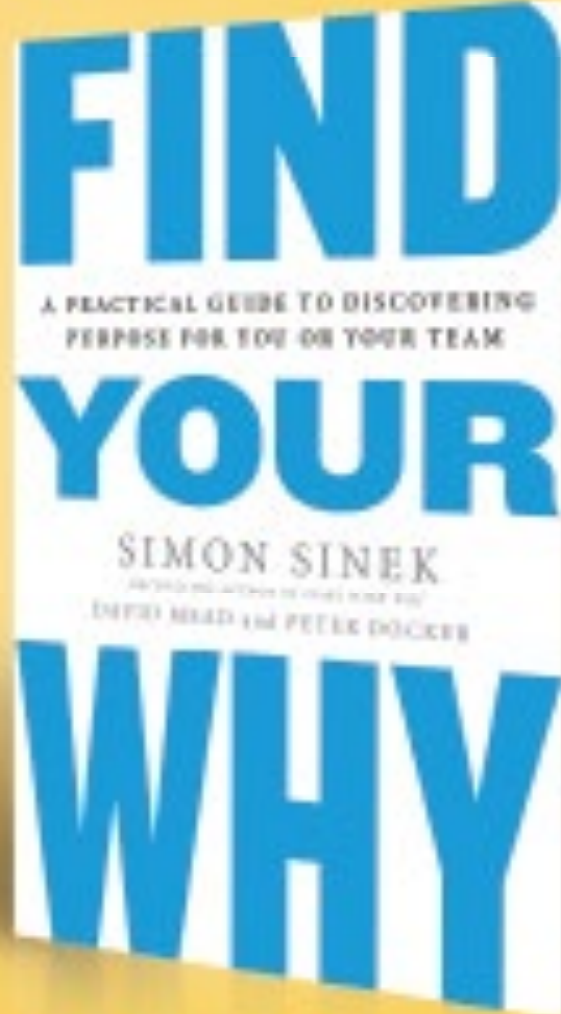
However, there is a sadness to see Uncle have to leave in that manner. After all, he did spearhead the liberation of the country. But more than anything, at least we will no longer have to endure his annoying sons tweeting about how they can buy expensive watches because papa “owns” a country. ■

NEW ON THE SHELVES

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Aids hocus pocus. Have we learned nothing?

I'M USUALLY A PRETTY NICE GUY TO everyone who knows me. It takes a lot to get me mashing at the virtual buttons of my pocket computer in righteous anger – but those conspiracy theories about HIV and Aids have sure got what it takes to wipe that Mr Nice Guy smile right off my face.

The first time I heard one of these tinfoil-hat gems was when a physics lecturer of mine said that the HI-virus was created to exterminate black people in South Africa, using the nuclear programme that was later decommissioned. He was not joking, and I am not pulling your leg. It made no sense, but my main concern was: why would someone with a master's degree in physics believe this nonsense, let alone convey it to the world?

The issue came around again recently when a friend of mine ("friend" here used with its technical Facebook meaning – we hardly ever speak) posted an article that supposedly shows how the US created HIV in a lab to eradicate Africans and African Americans. He did not seem to notice that HIV is, in fact, not at all racist – which would make its creation one of the worst ideas the US has ever had. Which is saying a lot.

If you're kind, you could see his belief in this nonsense as coming from a good place; the undeniable history of racism in the US which has had many campaigns aimed at its black populace, from government-legislated racism, to the use of black men as guinea pigs, withholding treatment to test how bad syphilis can get before they die – remember the Tuskegee syphilis experiment of 1932 to 1972?

But there are so many ridiculous aspects to this conspiracy theory, that I found it difficult to hold on to the little sanity I have left when I kept



Dr Beetroot

falling down the dingy rabbit hole that came with every click on Google's button. When I tried to do my job as a science communicator and committed the ultimate sin of correcting someone on the internet, I discovered that is the fastest way to be deemed not "woke" enough – a blinding blow to my fragile ego.

South Africa has come a long way since Manto "Dr Beetroot" Tshabalala-Msimang refused millions of people life-saving ARVs because she believed

a crank, in spite of an overwhelming scientific consensus. This one example is proof-enough of how dangerous bad ideas around HIV and Aids can be. The issue is too big, too dire to be able to tolerate the "have your own views, I will keep mine" rhetoric that I get from my misguided "friend".

While the country has made major gains in the fight against HIV and Aids, at 7.1 million we still have the largest number of people in the world living with HIV, according to the UNAids programme. South Africa saw a conservative estimate of 270,000 new HIV infections and an estimated 110,000 lives lost in 2016 alone.

It gets worse: a study conducted not far from where I live in KwaHlabisa in KZN found that people are reluctant to seek treatment even after they find out they are HIV-positive. Published on World Aids Day 2017, the study by the Africa Health Institute shows that there is a stigma attached to seeking treatment. If that is the case, imagine how easily the proliferation of unfounded conspiracies can further hinder efforts to treat the illness.

An updated variant of the conspiracy theory – found on Twitter this time – is the belief that a cure has already been found but the people in charge will not distribute it for economic reasons: they stand to make more money from ARVs than from a cure.

So now you understand why I lose my cool when "wokeness" on the internet requires that I hold on to, or at least tolerate anti-science and ahistorical ideas. They have devastating effects that surpass the three extra wrinkles in my forehead: they are eroding the hard-won progress that has been made both in treatment and with educational programmes aimed at preventing any further spread of the disease... while the smartest of us continue to look for a cure. ■



A real Burke. Lewd man, genial mask

THE STRONG AND ADMIRABLE women reporters of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) and *The Sydney Morning Herald*, two venerable (and vulnerable) news institutions, after “slowly and meticulously” considering many allegations, have outed an Australian icon, the celebrity TV gardener Don Burke, accusing the star of “relentless bullying and harassment” of women, spanning decades.

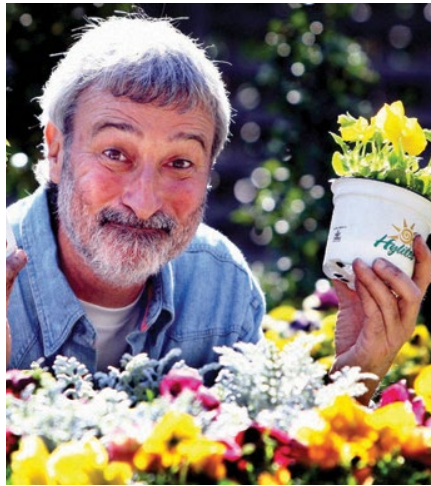
He’s an unpleasant, lewd man, doubly offensive because he’s hiding behind a genial mask.

It started out sounding like it might be a witch-hunt (if America’s doing it, so should we). A very decent male friend watching TV with me when the story broke became flustered, commenting that this could spell the end of flirting and humorous banter “which women also enjoy, with, say, the butcher”.

But the story broke on Monday, and by Tuesday, more than 200 women had come forward, among them winner of eight Olympic swimming medals, Susie O’Neill, who said that when Burke came to film a segment prior to the 2000 Olympics, standing in front of a painting of a flower, Burke had asked “Is your c*** as big as that?”

A publisher said she’d been scarred as a young woman when Burke promised her a career break but ended up pressuring her to spend the night in a “sad hotel room”. Another woman said both she and her husband had felt they needed to shower and scrub the house after he left, so vile was he – in stark contrast to his TV persona.

Everyone knew – his crews and management – but they turned a blind, if embarrassed, eye. Burke’s (self-diagnosed) claim that he has Aspergers has drawn the ire of the autism advocacy groups. “Own your behaviour Don. Don’t you dare smear the ASD community with your vulgar



Don Burke

actions,” said Nicole Rogerson, CEO of Autism Awareness Australia.

Australia’s brutality to asylum seekers and its offshore detention regime is touted by the government as a deterrent, a cruel-to-be-kind approach to stop refugees from paying people-smugglers and then drowning in leaky boats. But actually, says *The Guardian* in a definitive comment piece, it’s self-delusional because it’s the billions spent on an armada out at sea that stops the boats, the “ring of steel”, in Immigration Minister Peter Dutton’s words.

The Guardian’s assessment: “To be seen to be ‘tough on borders’ has outweighed all other considerations, pushing successive governments towards increasingly extreme positions, grotesque cruelties and risible rhetorical contortions in insisting their actions are reasonable, legal, or morally defensible... Failure, scandal, abuse and death has occurred under the watch of both main parties.”

Dutton says he knows the truth of the lies spread by detainees, advo-

cates, the United Nations, Amnesty International, Médecins Sans Frontières, the Australian Council for International Development, the Australian Medical Association, the Human Rights Commission, Human Rights Watch, the New Zealand government, PNG’s supreme court, PNG’s grand chief, Sir Michael Somare, multiple member nations of the UN, Australian voters, and even on the front page of the right-wing News Corp’s (Australian) *The Daily Telegraph*. Quite a list.

In more heart-warming news, a bunch of ambulance drivers in a lovely part of the world, Hervey Bay, diverted their vehicle so that an elderly woman being transported to palliative care could see the beach for the last time, run her hand through the cold water, and taste the salt.

“Diversity on the runway” has taken a step forward with fashion shows parading people of all shapes, sizes and backgrounds, while Australian department store, David Jones (owned by South Africa’s Woolworths) has models in their 40s to 60s, and Target and Kmart have Down Syndrome children in their catalogues, it is not surprising, since statistics show about 20% of people have some sort of disability, be it physical, intellectual or learning.

A David and Goliath story saw self-represented peace activists who had trespassed at the joint US defence facility, Pine Gap, score a win against highly paid government barristers arguing for up to seven years’ imprisonment to please their American partners. They were fined, mostly nominal amounts in Australian terms.

It’s been speculated that Prince Harry’s engagement to Meghan Markle could undermine the Australian Republican movement. Because it’s such a popular choice, people might be reluctant to divorce the monarchy. ■



Thukela. A miss is as good as a mile

WHEN I WAS BUT WEE MY SCHOOL mates looked upon me with some puzzlement because I had not a single male in my entire family, neither brother nor cousin nor father nor uncle to watch bloody rugby with me. Thus until I was fifteen-or-so when a certain lesbian lady name of Hilly who lived next door said to me one day Hey! If you're fit enough to ride your bike over hill and dale you're fit enough to climb the Drakensberg with us muscular maidens of the Hiking Club. Piece of cake, said I.

We made an early start to clamber up the highest part of the escarpment, to the source of the Thukela at 10,000 feet – altitude is always in feet, as navigation is in knots, see? Not rope and piton work this, it's more like vertical hiking, and up there we expected to enter a terrain of wild crags and howling winds and rugged raptors adapted to the furies of Nature Untamed. But we didn't, we found ourselves in a romantic landscape as of Constable and Turner, with a wondrous wispy waterfall and an overview of everything lush and calm and cosy halfway to the sea.

The memory of it was yet vivid in my mind after 40-plus years, when the very same Hilly emerged quite suddenly to ask about my stamina in old age, and would I like another whack at the 'berg. What part? said I. Well, once again the Thukela, said she, that's why I thought of you. Well now, said I, Jan Smuts used to climb Table Mountain in his seventies to show the world he was still the tough fighter of commando days; that's 3½ thou at sea level, and if I can't do 4 thou from a parked car to the top of the escarpment at 10 thou, I'm ready for an old folks' flophouse.

But why the Thukela? said I. Well you see, said she, I've been approached by a certain historian from the University of Glasgow, who is enthused by the whole melodrama of the Anglo-Zulu war. From early daguerreotypes and newspaper illustrations of the day



he has concluded that the countryside where the dreadful violence took place is much like the gentle green midlands of Scotland, with the peaceful Thukela meandering down its middle. Picturesque, calm. Now he wants to trace its entire colourful course from 10,000 feet to the Indian Ocean. He has climbed Mont Blanc and knows about mountains all right. So howsit? said Hilly. Piece of cake, said I.

He turns out to be a cheery mid-aged forever-youthful soul called Charles (pron Chairlie) with legs like great big coke bottles with long hairy socks and mountain boots, also the most advanced camera tackle of the day and a compass for navigation. Hilly and I straightway put him in charge of the expedition. And we're off! Up and away!

In the great echoing clefts of the escarpment Chairlie starts to yodel. All mountain folks yodel, says he, because of this echo effect. It occurs to me people of the Himalaya seem to get along without it, but let it pass. Tirol Tirol Tirol, du bist mein Heimatland, he sings, Weit über Berg und Tal das Alphorn schallt. Holdrioholdrioholdrio Kukukuk!

Hilly and I have a go at the yodelling and get only a sort of swooping Zulu hymn effect, but we're a companionable trio as suddenly we find ourselves over the top, and there before our amazed gaze appears a delightful little tarn with red-hot poker all about and ice-

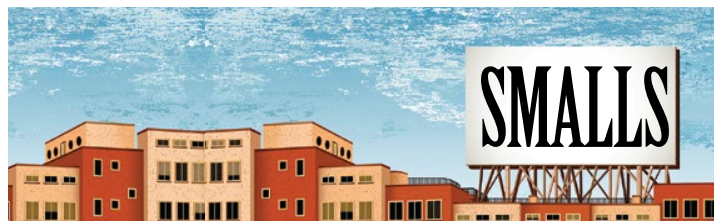
rats sleepily sunning their bellies. This is where we camp, says Chairlie, and he's no longer said it than 100% stratus cloud hits us, pouf! with 0% visibility. Aha! says he. Time for navigation!

We navigate all over the place with the magnetical compass. Who needs map reading? Common sense prevails. For two days we wander all about, blind. Hilly makes so bold as to suggest we're going to starve pretty soon. And as she says this tragic thing, woops! the cloud disappears entirely, here before us appears a half-dozen or so Basotho men sunning themselves like the ice-rats, and there, there behind them the Thukela, the wispy wonderful waterfall itself, like a delicate bridal veil!

We smile, we converse. How? H-sapiens will always find a way: bits of isiZulu, bits of fanagalo the pidgin lingo of gold mining, much body language, some onomatopoeia imitative of nature. Chairlie explains how a moist stable air mass coming off the Indian Ocean and rising over the Drakensberg escarpment expands and cools, that's when the moisture condenses into stratus cloud with zero visibility. And that's how the Thukela here gets its water.

Some silence, and a young lad in a balaclava says in good matric English: You've missed the Thukela by 40km. This is the Orange River, it runs 2,000km through dismal highveld and semi-desert to the Atlantic. ■

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