

GROWING MILKWOODS DOWN UNDER

Times Media Limited's Stephen Mulholland has gone to Australia to head the Fairfax Newspaper Group. GUS SILBER caught him in jovial mood on the day of his farewell party in Johannesburg and found principles are mixed with the profit motive

IN Harrison Street, Johannesburg, rushing from the Carlton Centre to Times Media Limited, I find myself stuck on the fringes of the biggest traffic jam in weeks. My first instinct is to turn around and run in the opposite direction. My second is to lean against a traffic light and watch it all go by. I lean.

It is lunch-time and the crowd is buoyed on waves of singing, the melody rising and swamping everything in its path. Behind their idling engines, motorists and bus drivers look on with mild curiosity. No one hoots.

I watch the forest of clenched fists open into clicking fingers as dances break out among the marchers. Red flags ripple in the breeze. Retrench the Bosses. Forward to a Working-Class Democracy.

I wait another 20 minutes for the tail of the march. I cross the road.

"For those of us, like me, who are not naturally light-hearted, of sunny disposition or given to easy optimism, living in South Africa is often akin to labouring under a dark and heavy cloud."

For Stephen Mulholland, who wrote those words in a leader article in *Business Day* three days after FW de Klerk's Big Speech of 1990, the cloud has lifted once again. But, this time, the view below is of Sydney, Australia, home of the Opera House, the Harbour, and the head office of Fairfax Newspapers Plc.

The new managing director of Fairfax is 56. We see him on the cover of *Leadership* magazine, Volume Eight, Number Five, at the height of his tenure as chief executive officer of Times Media Limited.

Jacketless, hands on hips, he faces the camera with an almost boyish air of self-satisfaction. His Irish eyes are smiling. His lips are pursed. He is wearing a red

tie with dark diagonal stripes and a blue pinstriped shirt with bold white collar and cuffs.

People have always admired Stephen Mulholland's shirts. They have become his trademark, the barcode of his down-to-work business ethic. Jackets do not suit the man.

Last year, jacket off, Mulholland exhorted the milling throng at TML's Christmas party to strive for even greater results in the coming financial year. He fingered the cut of his hand-made silk shirt.

"I would like to keep on dressing in the style to which we have all become accustomed," declared the managing director of Times Media Limited. Not everyone was 100 percent certain that Stephen Mulholland was joking.

Not naturally light-hearted, or of sunny disposition, I ask a few people who have worked for and with Stephen Mulholland if they would like to say a few words about the experience. Everyone talks in glowing terms.

"A pyrotechnic temper." "A man possessed by a flame." "A very volatile personality." "Dynamite." "He'd fire you up." "He fired me."

The legend of that temper, the quick fuse and the flare-up, precedes Mulholland wherever he walks. He is what the scientists call a Type A personality. Intensely competitive, driven, fearless, demanding. Yet, when I get to interrupt his schedule on the 10th floor of 11 Diagonal Street (home to TML), Stephen Mulholland is in a Type B mood.

Affable to the point of serenity, quick to laugh, he gazes out of the window often, searching for a word, a place, a time. His small desk is cluttered, with three telephones as paperweights. For now, they are quiet.

Stephen Mulholland was a year old when his family moved from Liverpool to South Africa in 1937. His father, a hard-drinking Irish stonemason, had come to help build the Voortrekker Monument. Then the family moved to Durban. A small house in Point Road, on the wrong side of the docks.

"We are all complex and have many dimensions to our personalities. The other reality is that we change as time goes by. Now I come from a rough background. We were poor. I grew up on the beach. You know, we would settle our problems in manners other than verbal."

Silence. The rustle of a silk shirt. Beyond the door, secretaries are frantically co-ordinating the logistics of the Farewell Party. Mulholland gazes out of the window.

"My father died early of... of excesses, and when he was alive, he was not always the ideal father. So I had a sense of loss in my life, a sense of grievance. And maybe that caused me to be easy to anger. In my defence, I can say that I have always been a giving person. I know that I have done things that I regret, in the sense of raising my voice, or being hard on someone. But I do hope I've been able to smooth some of the edges."

Jeremy Gordin, who was business editor to Mulholland on the *Financial Mail*, recalls the day the editor threw a chair at him from across the room. It missed.

"There was some problem with a story that just wasn't coming together," says Gordin. "When it finally arrived, I handed it to Mulholland and said, 'Well, here it is, but I'm afraid it's up to shit.' He just said, 'f... it', and threw the chair."

Gordin, now editor of TML's *Executive* magazine, lights a match and sticks it in the bowl of his pipe. "You have to understand," he puffs, "there hasn't been

“I’m not a manager, I’m a retreaded journalist. I kept telling these guys from Fairfax, ‘look you’re not going to be getting a normal businessman.’ The way I see it, managers manage numbers and leaders lead people. I like to think I’m a leader.”

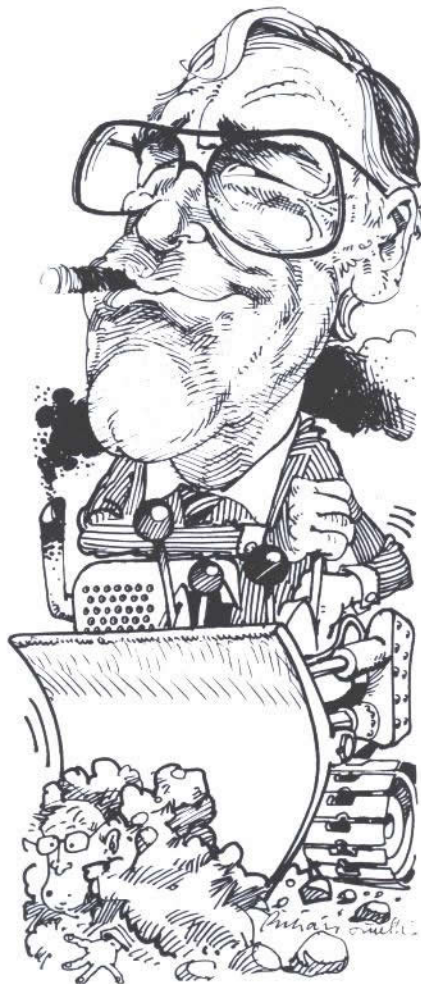
a time when I haven’t liked the guy. Hell, he would run me ragged, he would piss me off. But you know what it is about Mulholland? It’s the feeling that, when you’re in his company, you’re playing for the A-Team, despite your secret fears that you wouldn’t even make it to the B-Team.”

Three-hundred sit-ups every morning, weights, stretches, and a couple of lengths of the Zoo Lake pool. Stephen Mulholland is in training. He works best under pressure, and at TML, six years after Gordon Waddell asked him to take the job, the pressure is beginning to cool off. The machine runs smoothly. There are managers.

I ask Stephen Mulholland about his “philosophy of management”. He laughs. “I’m not a manager. I’m a retreaded journalist. I kept telling these guys from Fairfax, ‘Look, you’re not going to be getting a normal businessman.’ The way I see it, managers manager numbers and leaders lead people. I like to think I’m a leader.”

I ask one of Mulholland’s managers what he thinks. Roy Paulsen is deputy managing director of TML, and he says: “I don’t think Stephen Mulholland is essentially a manager. He’ll probably tell you that himself. He’s more of a journalist, an editor, and that comes across in the way he thinks. His approach to running a company is intuitive rather than considered. Of course, he’s very volatile and not the easiest of people to work with. But one thing he has succeeded in doing is changing the culture of TML. And whether Steve stays or goes, that stays.”

Corporate culture is an intangible asset, a sense of esprit that pervades a workforce and the products that carry the logo. Every corporation has a culture. The trouble begins when a culture doesn’t



RICHARD SMITH

have a corporation.

In 1985, South African Associated Newspapers (SAAN) shut down the *Rand Daily Mail* and the *Sunday Express*. Dozens of journalists were retrenched. Many emigrated to Australia. The editor of the *Financial Mail*, however, was offered a promotion. He said he would think about it.

“I had no inclination or ambition to do anything other than edit the *Financial Mail*,” recalls Mulholland, not altogether convincingly for a man possessed by a flame. “It was a terrific job. I had freedom, I had access to whomever I wanted to see, I travelled every year to meetings of the International Monetary Fund. I could see no reason to leave my job. But they made it worth my while.”

On April 1, 1986, in a complicated rescue deal involving Johannesburg Consolidated Investments and the Argus Company, Mulholland officially took up his appointment as managing director of SAAN. In a report to shareholders the previous day, the company had claimed a loss of more than R20-million.

Exactly one year later, SAAN — now Times Media Limited — was able to report a profit of R10-million. Mulholland is quick to dismiss any suggestion that he alone was responsible for the turnaround.

“Gordon Waddell was the father of TML,” says Mulholland. “Terry Moolman of Caxton and John Featherstone of Argus were the... what do you call it, you know, the...”

The midwives?

“...yes. Moolman and Featherstone were the midwives, and I just stood on the sideline, leading the cheers.”

Today the culture of TML is characterised by a vigorous spirit of enterprise,

PLEASE TURN OVER

diversification and competition. Mulholland leans back in his chair and quotes Dr Johnson. "A man is no more innocently employed than in the pursuit of money."

There are a lot of innocent people in the employ of Times Media Limited. Mulholland's driving principle in this regard has always been merit. You get what you work for, and then you get a little extra for effort. Result: happy people, happy company.

Pat Sidley, former president of the South African Union of Journalists, worked for Mulholland when he edited *Business Times*. What was he like? Sidley grits her teeth. "Pleasant." That has always been a major part of the problem.

"From a union point of view," says Sidley, "Stephen Mulholland is the worst kind of boss on earth. He has the ability to seduce the loyalty of employees on an individual level."

Gwen Gill, the fearless consumer rights crusader of the *Sunday Times*, worked as Mulholland's secretary when he was the paper's news editor. I phone and ask whether she has anything to say, now that her former boss is leaving for Australia. "Yes," she says. "I'll tell you about the time he made me cry."

A few years ago, Gwen Gill was chapel father at TML. A quaint term, now replaced by the blandly non-sexist "union organiser". A member of the union called Gill with a complaint. It was the 25th of the month, and certain salaries had not been paid into accounts. Gill said she would take it right to the top. She called Stephen Mulholland.

"He hit the roof," says Gill. "He seemed to think I was implying that TML didn't have the money to pay its salaries. But I was used to him. I just said: 'Don't you shout at me like that,' and I forgot all about it."

Half-an-hour later, Gill was summoned to Mulholland's executive office. She smiled to herself. So typical.

"Good old Steve, I thought. He always does this. He lets off steam, and then he apologises. He's like a lion looking after its young. Hit out first, and fix it up afterwards."

"So I get up to the boardroom, and I sit across from him. And then he really shouts at me. All this business about his doing his best for the company, and us making accusations. Well, I tell you, I

just burst into tears right then and there." That was years ago. Stephen Mulholland has been forgiven. But he will not be forgotten. "You can't help but admire him," says Gill. "He's a stonemason's son, and he pulled himself up by his own bootlaces."

Growing up rough in Point Road, Stephen Mulholland swam, cutting through the water like a shark. Sixteen years old at Durban High School, he thrashed the South African record for the 220 yards freestyle. A schoolmaster's letter earned him a place at Purdue University, Indiana, USA. He studied journalism.

"I have this vision in my mind," says Mulholland. "A small boy sitting on a bus in Durban, reading a newspaper. Just like a grown-up. There was never any doubt in my mind that I was going to be a newspaperman."

That, and swimming. "The cutting-edge sport," Mulholland calls it. In 1960, as an All-American champion, he qualified for the Rome Olympics. But his American time wasn't accepted in South Africa, and he couldn't afford a ticket back home. So he stayed, got a green card, almost got married, and served Uncle Sam at Fort Knox in Kentucky.

The black sergeant moved slowly down the line, glaring at the newly-shorn recruits. "Where're you from soldier?"

Mulholland took a deep breath. "Durban Sir."

"Durham? Durham, South Carolina?"

"No Sir. Durban."

"Where the hell's that?"

"It's... South, Sir."

"South of what?"

Mulholland swallowed hard. "South Africa, Sir"

"South Africa, huh? I'd better be real good to you, soldier. I might have some kinfolk down there!"

Stephen Mulholland laughs. I have just asked a broad question about the state of the profession of journalism in South Africa. "It's not a profession. It's a job, a graft, something like that. A profession is an acquired body of specialist knowledge, as in doctor, lawyer, architect. Journalists don't have that. They absorb by osmosis."

Some of them don't even do that too well. It still rankles Mulholland that anyone could accuse him of putting profits above principle or bulldozing a sand-

dune in front of his holiday house in Natal. But these stories have persisted, despite repeated denials, corrections, and Letters to the Editor.

Just the other day, the *Financial Times* of London profiled the new managing director of Fairfax Newspapers as "a man who puts profit above principle." The source, once again, was that piece in the *Cape Times*.

Mulholland had been addressing a conference on Press Freedom. "I would put profit above journalistic principle," he was quoted as saying. A tape-recording later confirmed that the quote was accurate, except for one word. *Not*. It's supposed to come just before *put*.

The other story has persisted because it seems to fit the public image of Stephen Mulholland: a man who will not hesitate to re-arrange the beach if it blocks his view of the ocean.

"I did not knock down that dune!" says Mulholland, his lips re-arranged into a scowl. "The fact of the matter is that we used a front-end loader to shore up the dune with beach sand. I wanted that dune to protect the house from the sea-wind. That's where it stands today, covered with milkwoods. You don't grow milkwoods in a hurry."

Now there's something else. Mulholland is the man who urged South Africa to vote "Yes", and now...

"I never told people to stay in South Africa," says Mulholland. "I just helped raise money to support a vote for Yes. But I have always supported the freedom of individuals to do whatever they choose. My reason for going is absolutely divorced from politics. Look, I'm physically and mentally better when I'm working under pressure. I'm switched on and turned on, energised and invigorated. I'm not a baby. I'm 56. I suppose you could call it my last hurrah."

Framed on the wall of an office at Times Media Limited is a letter appointing Stephen Mulholland to the post of cadet reporter on the *Daily News* in Durban. The date is 1955, the salary is £20 a month.

The new managing director of Fairfax Newspapers Plc probably doesn't need reminding. But he's taking it along. Just in case. ●

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