

Colin Legum's long journey home

IT'S been a long way from Kestell to Fleet Street and back again. The round trip took me over 60 years. Fleet Street may be universally known as the former Mecca of journalists before they were relocated across London, but where on earth, you may ask, is Kestell?

It is a small Free State village across the way from QwaQwa, below the Mont Aux Sources. How does one get from there to Fleet Street? I am reminded of the answer given to a magistrate by a young PAC militant who had been arrested after returning from military training in China. "Well meneer," he told the magistrate who had asked him how he had got to China, "You leave Soweto by the Muldersdrift Road..."

In my own case I went by a bus to the railhead at Afrika's Kop to entrain for Johannesburg to take up my first job on a newspaper.

I combined my work as a journalist with a political career, serving for almost seven years on the Johannesburg City Council and, for a time, as general secretary of the old Labour Party.

When the Afrikaner Nationalists won the 1948 elections on their apartheid manifesto, I decided to go to England both because I saw no future for my brand of politics in the country, or for an independent career in journalism, but especially because I did not want to be part of the new apartheid society.

Two other reasons helped to guide my decision. The first was to inform British opinion about the true nature of apartheid; and the second was because I felt that the future course of events in South Africa would be determined largely by developments in the rest of the continent which was then poised on the eve of the decolonisation era.

On my arrival in London I was extremely fortunate to find that David Astor, the new young editor of *The Observer* was thinking along my lines. He made me the first Africa Correspondent in Fleet Street — a role later enlarged first to that of Commonwealth Correspondent and then as the paper's associate editor concerned mainly with Third World affairs.

My work gave me wonderful opportunities to cover the exciting years of the end of the British Empire and the birth of the new Commonwealth of Nations.

I was able to travel extensively across Africa and to meet the continent's future leaders. These personal contacts were of great value to me as a journalist when they later became heads of government.

With David Astor we enlarged our role as journalists to participate actively in the anti-colonial movement, notably in support of that early campaigner against apartheid, the Rev. Michael Scott. Among his other creditable achievements was his almost single-handed campaign that prevented General Smuts from incorporating the then South West Africa into the Union.

Together with Scott, the distinguished West Indian economist, Professor Arthur Lewis, and a fine British academician, Martin Wright, we wrote *Attitude to Africa* which became a seminal book in the anti-colonial struggle.

The Observer's special role in the struggle for African and colonial liberation was recognised by pundits like John Gunther who, in his valuable book *Inside Africa*, described the paper as 'the capital of Africa', by which he meant no more than that it was both the source for information about the changing continent and that it had extensive contacts with the still largely unknown new African leaders.

Until 1964 I was still able to make periodic visits back home to keep up with developments there. But in that year my wife and I wrote a book entitled *South Africa — Crisis for the West*.



'Apparently he wore a clip-on bow tie.'

We argued that if the South African conflict were to be prevented from descending into racial violence, it was necessary for the international community to become involved to break the deadlock. Our proposal was for an effective international campaign of sanctions.

It was the first book to argue this case. Not unexpectedly, the book riled Pretoria. My wife and I were banned from returning to South Africa without a special visa which, naturally, was always refused. Our exile lasted 34 years.

What has my experience in newspapers taught me?

First, the vital importance of journalists learning to write in plain, crisp and clear language.

Second, even as a committed journalist, it is crucially important to distinguish in one's reporting between straightforward information and opinion; there is room for both, but not in the same piece.

Third, the absolute need for a pluralist press, free from censorship, and with at least some papers not controlled by vested-interest proprietors or party-controlled ownership.

Fourth, the importance of independent-minded journalists willing to put their jobs on the line if necessary. (I resigned from *The Observer* when it was sold to Lonrho because I was not willing to work for a proprietor like Tiny Rowland who has his own agenda for Africa).

Fifth, the need for South African journalists, black and white, to learn about Africa; now that South Africa is about to join the continent politically there can no longer be any excuse for the widespread ignorance I find everywhere.

My own faith in Africa's future (as well as in South Africa's future) remains strong and undisturbed by the current fashion of writing the continent off as a 'basket-case'. One has only to travel around Africa, as I still do, to find the green shoots of revival and confidence.

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