



A FEW GOOD MEN

The plot theme of the unanimously acclaimed 1992 movie “A Few Good Men” was the dangerous difference between following orders and following one’s conscience. This legal drama was played out at the American Guantanamo Naval base in Cuba where two rookie marines were court marshalled over the death of a fellow marine. It seemed a legal slam dunk to the officer appointed to defend these two unfortunates. Digging further however, this naval attorney suspected a cover up at the highest level, with the two youngsters set up as scapegoats for the death, while orders that caused the death had come from the top.

Putting his career at risk, the defending marine attorney took on officialdom, calling the commanding officer of the naval base to the witness stand. In the end, the CO was hoist on his own petard. He finally admitted to giving the “Code Red” order which resulted in the rookie’s death.

A few good men in the defence team decided to stand with their consciences rather than succumb to the easy way out. Do nothing, take a plea to satisfy everyone and avoid a possible dishonourable discharge for challenging authority.

An anomaly can be drawn here between the actions of a legal team - “a few good men” - in a screen drama and the bravery and integrity of a man like Andre de Ruyter who certainly unwittingly bit off more than he could chew when he was hired by South Africa’s President Ramaphosa to “get the lights on” as our country teetered towards a grid failure precipice. His book “Truth to Power” is not only his personal journey through the murky sludge of the governing African National Congress (ANC)’s climate of corruption which was slowly seeping into the very marrow of South Africa’s survival as a functioning country. It is a key historical reflection of how throwing peoples with differing values together in one governmental system was doomed from the start.

It may have looked good on paper – they called it democracy – but it couldn’t work because the “values” upon which this country has been governed since 1994 are far removed from the mores and standards (let alone mentalities) of

those who created modern South Africa and indeed the modern world. Allowing people like the ANC to usurp this country, given their background, history and their violent path to power, was a veritable death sentence for South Africa. Nowhere is this more acutely summarised, even inadvertently, as in de Ruyter's book.

It all comes down to conscience, accountability and a sense of responsibility to South Africa's peoples, all 60 million of them. There is not even a smattering of these qualities to be seen in the appalling summary of the sabotage, incompetence, nepotism and shameless venality of the ANC government's treatment of what was named "the world's best power utility by the Financial Times in 2001, a mere two decades before it was crippled by systemic corruption, load shedding and enormous financial losses". (Truth to Power. P. 44).

In the chapter "One call opens Pandora's box", de Ruyter tells of an anonymous phone call he received on a Sunday afternoon in May 2020. "The man at the other end of the line identified himself as an artisan working at Tutuka power station just outside Standerton" says de Ruyter. "He wanted to warn me of a sub-standard piece of equipment that was about to be installed on Unit 5. It was a submerged scraper chain, used for removing ash from the boilers of coal-fired power plants".

"Boss, I have a problem" he said. "They want me to install this, but I can see it's not right. Nobody is listening to me, but I know if we install it, it will break. I know it will break. That is why I'm calling you". De Ruyter immediately reached out to a senior maintenance manager at Tutuka who straight away phoned the team on site to investigate and prevent the potentially defective equipment from being installed.

"At this stage I had been on the job for about five months" said de Ruyter. "The call was worrying in several respects. Not only because of the submerged scraper chain being of poor quality, but also because the whistle blower had felt he had to bypass several layers of management and go straight to the CEO to be heard."

This is a key statement and is at the core of Eskom's collapse. Corruption existed from the bottom to the top at Eskom. The whistle blower knew this and de Ruyter was the only person he felt he could trust. The faulty piece of equipment had been purchased from a so-called "emerging supplier", "in keeping with SA's myopic industrial policy that drives local content at the expense of using parts from the original equipment manufacturer."(P. 108) "The local parts were substandard, kept on failing, and robbed us of

generation capacity. While the new industrialists were being empowered, the country was being de-powered", declared de Ruyter.

This "local content preference" policy makes sense if the local suppliers are honest. But as has been ably set out in the 2022 Final Report of the Zondo Commission, the ANC is involved in corruption of "industrial proportions" at every level of government, state-owned enterprises and many sectors of the private sector. For over 20 years, the party and individual members have been involved in the looting of public resources; the abuse of state power; patronage; bribery; vote-buying; nepotism; state capture; and others. (Part V1, Vol 2, P. 202). De Ruyter's book ably demonstrates this. But without his book, how long would this corruption have gone on unopposed, un-policed, un-hobbled by the president of the country who is also the president of the ANC? Where was he when Eskom was being assaulted and raped? Where would we have ended up without this book?

CHAIN REACTION

"The anonymous call set off a chain reaction. It prompted me to delve deeper into the situation". (p.107) De Ruyter soon found that submerged scraper chain failures were responsible for an inordinate number of power plant breakdowns. Why was nobody questioning the repeated failures of this key piece of equipment, he asked. In a well-functioning company it would not have been necessary for an anonymous whistleblower to raise the red flag, or for the CEO to get involved.

De Ruyter took the bull by the horns and decided to investigate himself where the chains were housed in the warehouse and from which supplier they had been ordered. There were no chains in the warehouse sector where they should have been kept. The absence of this vital piece of equipment prompted him to order a full audit of Tutuka's warehouse. The result was the writing off of R1,34 billion of phantom equipment alone. He tried to implement a bar coding system but his plans met with "stiff internal resistance", he says. He was told the system "would not work." "The creativity of the blocking brigade knew no bounds", he declared.

He organised a team of auditors to be sent to Tutuka. Gradually they exposed the rot at the power station, in all departments. Thus a seemingly simple straightforward enquiry to check out a key piece of equipment had opened "a putrid can of worms". Said de Ruyter:" It would be no exaggeration to say that these two Tutuka breakthroughs saved South Africa billions". (P.110). And all because of a phone call from a good man with a conscience!

IT'S THE LITTLE THINGS THAT COUNT

It all comes down to attitudes to small and big things. Cleanliness, order, accountability, conscience, honesty, integrity, good management. Without a mindset that can discern what is important and what is not, nothing in a modern world will work. Engineering is a field where detail is vital. Detail however is not crucial in the ANC's third world mindset. At times it seems they don't care about detail at all. Chapter after chapter of Andre de Ruyter's book reveals a shocking neglect of the small things. Dereliction was in every corner. Dust, papers, poor housekeeping and worst of all, the glaring evidence of president Ramaphosa's cadre deployment policy of political allegiance over efficiency and managerial skills. Eskom morphed to third world status in a very short time.

And ANC attitudes? Inexplicable to anyone with a modicum of common sense. De Ruyter describes receiving a letter from 72 pensioners shortly after taking office who were willing to come back to Eskom and work as they wanted to help save the energy crisis. Good news? To normal people yes! An admirable sentiment from good citizens. But not to the abnormal people in our society. "The EFF went ballistic and labelled me a racist. No sooner has a white man taken over than he's bringing back the old white people, they complained. (Minister) Pravin Gordhan had no stomach for this fight and instructed me to reject the pensioners' offer", declared de Ruyter.

How can South Africa function under a government which doesn't know what it doesn't know? The ANC/EFF and their comrades would rather see South Africa turn to dust than admit that they are useless, and that the private sector (which created the country's infrastructure in the first place) is the only group that can get things right. The corruption, the thieving, the nepotism, the inefficiency, the laziness, the complete lack of urgency – all of these third world traits are evidenced in de Ruyter's book and are really at the core of the author's anger and frustration. Who really cared less about South Africa than these ANC slackers, and more about their own political survival and the forthcoming elections?

SENSE OF FAILURE

In Chapter 26, the author tells of his "sense of failure" in that Eskom was "letting the country down". Stage 6 load shedding was crushing the country and the people. He was to visit Kusile power station. Because it was a site visit, de Ruyter was dressed in his overalls and safety boots. "Kusile's plant manager, on the other hand, was dressed to the nines, welcoming me in a fancy suit and pointy shoes." (That says it all!) The CEO's group was taken to a hall where tables were

piled with food. "Between fifty and sixty people were standing around chatting, piling food onto their plates. Don't we have a sense of urgency?" wondered de Ruyter. This chapter outlines the horror story of where coal was being supplanted by rocks in a syndicate scam of mammoth proportions.

His next visit was to the Camden water treatment plant. There were problems with valves, one having been opened when it should have remained closed. Havoc resulted. Sabotage could not be proven. But de Ruyter pressed on to the rest of the building with his team.

"I toured the rest of the water purification plant, which was in a shambles. While the floors were clean they were wet, betraying an urgent cleanup effort. Behind filters stacked in front of the fire extinguisher (!), the floor was still covered in an inch of pigeon droppings. In other corners lurked discarded helmets and rubbish. I picked up the rubbish and showed it to the team."

"The power station was in the same condition. I asked to speak to the relevant section manager and each time the blame was shifted to someone who was not there. 'I'm not the responsible person' I heard again and again", said de Ruyter. "The age of a plant is not an excuse. I had seen that in Germany where I was in charge of a plant that dated from 1936 and was still in great condition, running perfectly. It was so clean you could eat off the factory floor."

The author had a checklist and a notebook in his hand on his inspection route. "Right off I grabbed a plastic bag and started collecting rubbish. In a workshop I picked up discarded cold-drink bottles, rags and rubbish, most of it coated in a layer of dust. We reached the control room. No station manager, no oversight, no support for the workers. The room was dirty and dusty, with a half-eaten packet of peanuts, an empty Energade bottle and old documents from 2018 still lying on top of a cupboard." (P. 261) "I had looked for small problems" says de Ruyter. "If you don't start with the basics, you can't fix the big problems" he told the team following him. "It just shows to what extent Eskom's skills have been eroded. Not only hard engineering skills but the soft skill of leadership and the institutional knowledge of what 'good' look like."

Most media reports on the book have concentrated on the graft, the corruption, the inefficiency, the greed and the alleged two cabinet ministers heading syndicates because they "needed to eat". This was stated by minister Pravin Gordhan when de Ruyter challenged him on what had been discovered by the private Intelligence investigators hired by the author to uncover the corrosion.

But the real problem is the attention to detail, the difference between the market in Dakar Senegal and the Pick n Pay and Woolworth's retail stores in South Africa. The difference between the first world and the third world. Eskom is a first world creation. The ANC is third world through and through, despite the Gucci suits, the pointy shoes and the smart offices. The ANC uses the first world but they don't understand it. It is not generic to them, ably demonstrated in the book. They abandoned Eskom because they didn't care about or even see the detail. Their big projects to "fix" our ports and our railways and "renew" our country will never work because they don't understand detail. Unless the private sector steps in and takes Eskom by the scruff of the neck, we may be nearer Dakar, Senegal than we think.