



THE JESTERS CLUB

SOUTH AFRICA

SA Jesters Squash Tour – Canada
16th May to 2nd June 2008

*In memory of Jock Burnett, who started the Jesters Club in 1928 –
“Enjoy what you have done!”*



Jock Burnett receiving the Jesters Award at the Jesters 60th Re-union in 1988

Dedication

This narrative is dedicated to my Dad, Rex Pennington, the first South African Jester (1948). He introduced me to squash and to the Jesters Club, and he has always been the very best example of what being a Jester means.



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Thanks: My Personal Assistant (Boss) Leanne Nimmo typed and prepared this whole narrative –
Ngiyabonga Kakhulu (Zulu for “many thanks”)

Introduction and Credits

The Canadian Jesters Tour 2008 comprised Messrs. Mike Short (Captain – KZN), Pandy Katakuzinos and his wife Bernice (St Francis – Eastern Cape), Roger Fuller-Good and his wife Georgina (Gauteng), Keith Cretchley and his wife Anne (Knysna – Southern Cape), Michael Collins and his partner Cheryl (CT), Bradley Harber (Gauteng) and Steuart Pennington and his wife Camilla (Gauteng).

In the nature of such tours the team met for the first time at O.R. Tambo International airport as they assembled from all parts of the country. Captain Mike handed out our kit and then suggested that these *strangers to each other* have a team talk in the local Baron! It doesn't take long for squash players, particularly Jesters, to have a beer, make an impression on each other, and hopefully, understand the importance of making an impression on those that were to host them! This narrative will record our magnificent time with our hosts and our serious intent in *living* the values of being a good Jester.

Halifax

After a long flight (16 hours) we were met in Halifax by the Atlantic chapter of the Canadian Jesters and dispersed, care of Ray Souchereau, to our respective hosts. This was to happen seven times in the next 18 days and had obviously taken a great deal of co-ordination and planning on behalf of the Canadian Jesters, nevertheless this was our first encounter with both the country and our hosts, most of us probably experienced a tinge of anxiety as we entered the arrivals lounge at Halifax! I was lucky enough to be hosted by Stewart and Shirley McInnes who didn't know I was arriving until I did (!) and were warmly accommodating despite the element of surprise. Stewart had retired from active lawyering, sitting on the Canadian Senate, and playing squash, but he certainly hadn't retired from life! Between ensuring that he had the most beautiful garden in all Halifax, an acre and a half of it, and playing lots of golf he also was deeply involved in mediating land and mineral extraction claims on behalf of the Canadian Aborigines (Indians) or 1st Nation as there indigenous people are commonly referred to.

All a little weary we were hosted that afternoon at the Mosaic restaurant owned by Canadian Jester Costa Elles in downtown Halifax to a wine tasting evening in the company of our hosts, who mostly drank modestly (for fear of drink driving), except for Stewart, (he and I got off to a good start!☺) as the SA contingent gulped down copious quantities of alcohol.

Next day Roger and Brad chose to play golf in the pouring rain while the rest of us were given a tour of Halifax and surrounds. A university town, Halifax is blessed with magnificent waterways, coves, and charming little fishing villages.

That afternoon we convened for our first squash game on Canadian soil, we all won our games except Bradley Harber, who claimed to have “chucked” his game in the interests of South African/Canadian Jester squash relations after which we (27 in total) convened at Stewart's house for a lobster feast. We all mucked in by chopping, cutting and eating these 1.5kg beasts.

Captain Mike welcomed all graciously and I gave a 15 minute talk on “South Africa - A Brief History”, which was well received.



Moncton

Next day we were off to Moncton under the guidance of Marc Lalonde (President – Atlantic Region).



On the way we stopped at Joggins Fossil Centre for lunch and a guided tour before congregating for a mix and match series of doubles in the afternoon, some of us won all our games, some won some and lost some, Brad was the only person to lose every game! (I was quite tempted to induct an appropriate nickname immediately but was advised against it by Captain Mike).

After we had great dinner hosted by Bill and Donna Stewart after which Brad did the honours and thanked our hosts. Rather to my surprise he displayed quite a keen wit and had many of our Canadian guests laughing *a lot* as he began the process of acquainting Canada with South African humour. At this stage I was battling to throw off his “most-lawyers-are-boring” image which I had been warned of back home.



Brad incidentally had a similar experience with me, we had been introduced three weeks previous to the tour and I rather distractedly – I am prone to distraction – had greeted him as he later described “Distantly, with no warmth; aloof, with no smile;” So he phoned Captain Mike, “Jeez, have you met this Steuart Pennington guy – he’s a PILE of fun!”

Both these incidences were to repeat during our stay. “Smiley” Pennington had already become a private joke with the boys! We ended our stay in Moncton by attending a delicious brunch hosted by Rob and Merilyn Black and later departed via aeroplane for Montreal.





Montreal



Montreal is a big city with a rich history. Kerry Martin (President – Quebec Region) was our official host and took us to Ross and Marie Bradley for lunch, typically Brad “Joker-in-the-Jesters”, Captain Mike, Roger and Keith decided to spend a rainy afternoon acquainting themselves with the Montreal Jesters with the assistance of Savignon Blanc and Stella Artois. Mike C’s partner Cheryl, wishing to avoid a long afternoon sitting around with the boys fluttered, “Where’s your credit card?” as they went shopping, while I joined Kerry with Anne Cretchley on a cultural tour of the city. The “French” character of Montreal is significant, in many places it’s quite difficult, language-wise, to be understood.



The Montreal Jesters hosted an informal dinner at a local Italian restaurant that evening with none of us really anticipating what a big day was to follow. At 09h00 Kerry has us lined up for a walking tour of the “old” city, our French guide who ‘ad a ‘appy disposition, Fredrick, walked us around the French/Anglo ‘istory of Montreal often referring to the English “regime”. The highlight was the Notre Dame Basilica built in 1825, which was breathtaking in its beauty with magnificent ceilings, stained glass windows and an interior mostly of wood, gold and blue finishes. Thirsty from our walk we had a boozy Italian lunch (during which Mike C “Where’s my credit card?” and Cheryl went off shopping again!) and then found ourselves in the Vieux Port (old harbour) being inducted to shoot the Lachine rapids on the St. Lawrence River in a jet-boat. Next minute we were being thrown about in the rapids not once but a dozen times.

Drenched and exhausted, but exhilarated, we were then dispatched to the Atwater Club to engage in singles and North American “hardball” doubles.



I detected a glint in Kerry’s eye as he paired me off with Eric Pemberton-Smith, 20 years my junior, and assembled a number of fresh-faced Montrealais to do battle with us. The bugger had stage-managed the whole thing! Anyway, we managed to acquit ourselves quite well, and loved the opportunity to play hardball doubles.

That evening we had a “formal” dinner, with Kerry Martin doing the honours with myself saying grace in Zulu (seriously), proposing the motion of thanks and delivering a 15-minuter on South Africa. Later that evening the youngest Jesters, namely Brad “Joker-in-the-Jesters”, Roger and Captain Mike (yes Mike S!), together with James Boxer (one of the younger Montreal Jesters) visited the nightclubs of Crescent Street where Brad, the king of tequila, lost his crown after falling on his own sword after one too many, and probably one too many jokes, and had to retire home early!!



Upon our return to South Africa I received a delightful doggerel from Kerry which described our visit, and our feelings, perfectly.

Recollections of a South Africans' visit to Montreal

It's in the autumn time now here
The opposite season of your year
Now plans are made for squash to come
And often not of times by gone

Yet memories come flooding back
Our memories we're trying to rack.
What was his name? Where was he from?
I never thought I was this dumb.

And some times linger, linger long,
Of all the streets we walked along
And rapids that we did go down,
And in which we thought we'd drown.

Of water, water everywhere,
Running down throughout our hair,
Getting everything all wet
That was a day we'll not forget.

Of playing squash, and drinking beer
Of making friends and of good cheer
Of food and wine, and not much sleep
For what we sow we surely reap.

Of feeding carrots to the deer,
Who came beside us without fear.
Of buffaloes, and wolves and bear
Of which we had to take real care.

And now we're home, our feet are up,
From running round trying to catch up.
As we sort out the bric-a-brac.
At Montreal we're looking back
Through mists of memory we peer
Wishing that our minds would clear
To our recollections we appeal
Was everything we did all real?

Next morning, stiff from the doubles, we set off for Ottawa. En route we stopped off at Omega Game Park in Montebello for the handover to the Ottawa Jesters. Despite the unseasonal rain we had a good time viewing elk, black bear, boar, arctic wolf, timber wolf, racoon, red fox, red tailed deer, white tailed deer, bison and beavers (that is the wild variety!). Rather unusually, for us, we were encouraged to feed the animals by being issued bags of carrots. Rumour has it that Brad ate some to quench his "nadors" (Afrikaans for after-thirst, a tequila induced medical condition that creates an unstoppable desire for re-hydration)

Ottawa

Tony Clarke was my host, an immigrant from the West Indies, he had hosted a Nicky Oppenheimer cricket tour back in 1976, which was disrupted across the country by anti-apartheid protesters. He had many interesting perspectives on life in Canada. We met the Ottawa Jesters at the Good Life - Queens View Club and had a few games of soft-ball doubles, on an international doubles court. We also celebrated the admission of Penny Glover, the first female Ottawa Jester into the club. Jack and Janice Cornett, with their squash playing daughters, Alex and Sam hosted us for dinner at their magnificent riverside house. Needless to say....actually..... maybe I should not go there!

The Canadian winters are cold, this year they had six feet of snow, so the houses are compact – to conserve energy – with central heating, double glazing and efficient use of space. Most of the houses we stayed in had a foot print 10m by 12m on the ground with a basement below the ground, used for recreational purposes, a ground floor with a TV room, dining room, kitchen, washing room and lounge with three bedrooms, bathrooms and a study upstairs equalling +/- 360m² of house, on an open plot (no walls anywhere) of +/- 360m².



Vin Taylor was our consummate host, and at 69 is in better shape than most of us, except possibly for Roger Fuller-Good, who was bounding in energy helped by the fact that he had, for six days, been pining for his wife. We had a wonderful two days in Ottawa, the capital of Canada. Brad “Joker-in-the-Jesters”, Mike C “Where is my credit card?” and Roger “Can’t wait for my wife” played golf while the rest of us visited the sites of Ottawa and the quite extraordinary History of Civilization Museum.

The Museum literally “told the story” of the early peoples of Canada, the French settlers, the English settlers and the evolution of Canadian character. The indigenous Indians are 1 million (5% of Canada’s population) in number and speak 53 different dialects broadly comprising 11 language groups. Their attachment to, and respect for, the land is a lesson to us all “we are part of the land and our future is in the land”.



That day Tony kindly offered me the daily “Ottawa Citizen” to read. The editorial was entitled “Africans killing Africans”. The xenophobia in South Africa has attracted bad press, legitimately, but on balance this editorial was full of inaccuracies and typical of the Eurocentric afro-pessimism that we have come to expect from Western journalists. My talk to the Ottawa Jesters challenged this editorial as I tried to explain some of the realities of Africa and South Africa. To my surprise I was encouraged by Ottawa Jesters to write to the “Ottawa Citizen” to contradict the content. I did, and the letter is enclosed (See appendix1).

After a *long* evening of squash we were hosted by Naomi and Terry Rideout. Roger “Can’t wait for my wife” did the honours during a delightful dinner, after which some of us departed for Moxies – a nightclub bar – reported to have the sexiest waitresses in all of Canada. “We were in our element and Mike C “Where’s my credit card?” rather uncharacteristically was on his own, but he behaved like a good fellow Jester should! I talked mostly to the waitresses that could only speak French. Roger “Can’t wait for my wife” kept ordering tequilas and “blow jobs”, the waitresses seemed not to know about the latter and offered us a “juicy pussy” instead. I was so embarrassed I didn’t know where to look – but smiled inside, not bad!!

Next day, tired from the squash and a late night at Moxies we boarded the train, first class, to Toronto. Travelling along the shores of Lake Ontario was like being in the Maldives, azure water (fresh), a beautiful coastline of farmland right down to the water’s edge, and a sea-like horizon. Magnificent!



Toronto

No sooner had we arrived Pandy, Bernice, Brad and I had lunch at John and Cathy Boynton's gracious home, which Pandy cooked, mostly to distract himself from the beautiful and young Labrador puppy! (Watch this space).

We were then whisked off to the Toronto Lawn and Tennis Club to engage in singles and "hard-ball" doubles. The facilities were magnificent and the club full of people enjoying the first decent days of summer. Toronto is a beautiful city on the shores of Lake Ontario with waterways everywhere – in many ways quite English in character.

That evening we attended the Jesters Annual Spring Party, brought forward to accommodate our visit with around 130 people in attendance. Mike Hobart, President of Ontario Jesters did the honours by first introducing the new Jesters and their nominees, and then acknowledging those Jesters with long service. Captain Mike introduced the team. In the meantime Cathy Boynton had typed the letter I wrote to the Ottawa Citizen and despatched it, so when I gave my South Africa talk I asked her to read the last paragraph out loud, there were a number of people who were really quite choked up, herself included.

"Yes, you are right when you say "South Africa is struggling to define its own future". We are a society in transition battling with the challenges of transformation. But we are a good people. 93% of South Africans "give" to social causes every month; and we are a forgiving people, our democratic transition from a tyrannical regime and our Truth and Reconciliation Commission remains a marvel in the modern world; and we are a hopeful people, the majority of South Africans are more optimistic about the future now than ever in our past. We have achieved economically, politically, and socially in a manner that no-one, in particular Euro-centric Afro-pessimists, believed possible 14 years ago. As a white South African I am proud of my country, our people, our culture, and our achievements. I have been sharing this with your good people, so I hope you will do me the courtesy of publishing this letter in the Ottawa Citizen, despite the fact that it exceeds 300 words!"



It was in Toronto that I really felt the "lesson" the Canadian Jesters have taught us, they really know each other well, and they take their contribution to squash seriously, sponsoring junior tournaments and encouraging support for the game. Later Brad and I spent until 3.30am with the Boynton's listening to music, drinking single malt (no tequila for moi!), and celebrating Canadian/South African Jester relations!

Early next morning we were guests of Cass Quinn (my Mum and Dad had talked very fondly of him) and Tom Nederpal on our way to Niagara Falls, we lunched at the oldest golf club in North America, the “Niagara on the Lake” Golf and Country Club. Cass Quinn was his “usual” (I’m told) dry-humoured self, picking on Brad and Pandy quite regularly. (I dutifully passed on the Alexandra Educational Trust brochures to him on the instruction of my mother! He undertook to mobilise the Canadian Jesters to sponsor a number of underprivileged kids – very good of them and again illustrates the energy of Jesters Canada...and Cass!).



The Falls were awesome, very different to our own Victoria Falls and a *huge* tourist attraction. I reckon 20 000 visitors were there that day. Dave and Barbara van Wely then had us to a “barbeque”, where Mike C did the honours, once again we were showered with gifts. Captain Mike thanked everybody and then he and the young bucks went off via limousine to the Pour House.



Georgina Fuller-Good had arrived that morning with a love letter from Brad's 2008 model, Bridgette...so Badger (nickname no longer appropriate) "Rogie" and she elected to retire early with sympathetic looks from the Canadians (for who?) and a little envy from Brad who had had time to read his letter, and then re-read it a couple of times! Young love! Rumour has it those who stayed at the Pour House were seduced by a number of Canadian Armed Forces belles – but *what goes on tour stays on tour* (as will the limo ride home)! I'm told that Pandy and Bernice used their discretion and left early and that Brad and Captain Mike partied until 4.00am! I stayed at home to fire off a letter to the Toronto Globe and Mail (Letter no. 2 edited by Cathy) mostly because the guests at Dave's barbeque raised the content of that days Globe and Mail with me, I felt I had to respond.

“Sir, I am a South African travelling through this beautiful country. Obviously I am saddened by the negative press my country is receiving during this time of xenophobic violence, but your report to-day by Sir Max Hastings "The Root Cause, Severe Poverty has doubled in a Decade" (May 24) needs to be challenged. During the past decade our Social Grant system has been extended from 2 million people in 1996 to 12.5 million people to-day, 70% of whom are children. Since 1996 we have built 2.5 million houses for the poor and brought fresh water and electricity to 17 million citizens, who didn't have it before. GDP per capita has grown by 20% over the past 5 years and Statistics SA reports that the income of the poorest 10% of our population has improved by 70% over the same period. That poverty remains a big issue in South Africa is true, that poverty has doubled over the past decade is not the truth. Respected journalists should check their facts”.



Next morning we were off, on another superb day, to the Royal Canadian Yacht Club for brunch as guests of John LeHeup. We were requested to dress “smart casual”. Captain Mike thought this meant scruffy shorts, a un-tucked-in golf shirt and running shoes – John politely asked me, dressed in his jacket and Jesters bow-tie whether this was the Pietermaritzburg code? Pandy offered some spare long pants – they have the same waist sizes – fortunately the Royal Canadian Yacht Club turned a blind eye. I think everyone was a little confused by Captain Mike’s dress code and Pandy’s offer of fresh trousers. Either circumstantially or purposefully Mike and Pandy (and Bernice) shared a lot of accommodation together and were in a lot of photos together, maybe it was because their unbelievable propensity to laugh at just about anything (“Smiley” Pennington becoming overwhelmed) or their mutual affection for dogs, or their similar approach to dress codes – no-one really knew. But there was a moment when the three of them were sitting in the back of the car, laughing continuously, with pictures of Pandy and Bernice’s DOGS stuck to the back of the front seats. My memory fails as to who the Canadian host drivers were, but imagine the scene Mike and Pandy sitting next to each other – cosily – laughing; Bernice ogling her dogs with a brand new Canadian host in escort, the car stops, Bernice emerges holding pictures of dogs and Pandy and Captain Mike emerge arm-in-arm and THEN Pandy, as photos are being taken, proceeds to kiss Captain Mike – THE DOG! We were quick to learn that the reason for this is that Pandy (and Bernice for that matter) were missing their dogs so much that Pandy felt compelled to display affection to the nearest thing to their canines – that being ... Captain Mike!

Towards the end of the brunch Captain Mike did the honours and the Canadian Jesters presented us with ties, and very kindly gave us two extra for Dave Short and Rex Pennington, the latter of whose antics during the Canadian Tour at St. Francis Bay are legendary (1997). As his son, I won't elaborate, but he knows what I am referring to, (*sometimes what goes on tour, doesn't stay on tour - Dad!*)

We then sadly bade farewell to Vin Taylor who had journeyed down from Ottawa to be with us. After a brief ferry ride we were in the Rogers Baseball Stadium to watch the Toronto Blue Jays take on the Kansas City Royals. John kindly bought Brad and me some Jays gear so that we could feel part of the crowd. An exciting game followed which the Jays won 3-1 and during which John must have fielded 325 questions from the two of us, like "How does someone go out?" "What's a tag?" - dumb asses!



That evening we were entertained by Barry and Gayle Grant to a Salmon feast, personally caught by Barry the previous day. The dinner was going very well and was great fun with everyone talking at once until... Cathy recounted the story of her son having his jaw broken two nights before, and waiting two days to tell her, out of respect for the fact that she had a houseful of South African guests. I asked rather innocently whether that was a reflection on Canadian maternal respect, there was a moment of silence in the room, and then later on, back at home, Cathy mentioned I should (using these acronyms/anagrams?) F.O.A.D because I was a D.F.C! I sensed that D.F.C in this context did not stand for Distinguished Flying Cross, more likely Dumb Foreign Citizen! I'm still baffled by the F.O.A.D. or is it D.A.F.O! Shocka! 05h00 sharp Barry was there to pick us up, three aspirins and a cup of coffee later we were at the airport on a 7.00am flight to Calgary. It's impossible to believe we are just over halfway through this exhausting trip! BUT, relief is imminent, Camilla joins me today!

Calgary



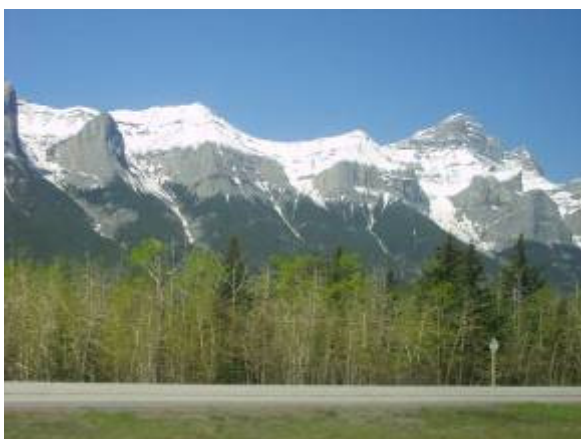
After a huge hug at the airport we were met by George Hall and taken to his home to meet his wife Carol. On a rainy cold afternoon we set off for Heritage Park where we discovered the “old” Calgary with an active steam engine, functioning hotels and trading shops all staffed by people in period costumes. We spent some 30 minutes talking to a young girl from the Blood Indian tribe. The parallels between their beliefs and those of our own “native” cultures are intriguing. A profound belief in the role of elders; the important sense of community; the battle the indigenous Canadian Indians are having with their own healing; and the dispelling of “Indian time” and “drunken Indian” stereotypes kept me spellbound. I learned of the reform school process initiated in the 1900’s to acculturate Indian kids by separating them from their parents and placing them in “residential schools” (read reform) as part of an acculturation process. This brought home some of our own social experiments in cultural domination!



Under the management of Mike Letourneau and Delton Gray (from Edmonton and President of Alberta Jesters) we did battle and enjoyed a superb meal at the Winter Club. Next day Grant Currie and Dave Clements took us off to the Rockies to Banff to see glaciated valleys, Lake Louise and the now famous Canadian Pacific Railway Hotels. We passed through a number of “Indian Territories” with “smoking” casino’s being built (these are not allowed outside the Reserves), reminiscent of some of our previous practices! Again, we did battle that evening followed by an informal supper around the bar during which Captain Mike handled the formalities, before it was again time to sadly bid everyone another round of very fond farewells, during which George and Carol Hall took pity in my dilapidated squash bag and gave me a brand new “pro” bag, which brought a big SMILE to my face (my team mates didn’t recognise me!).



Next day we departed in three mini-vans for Kelowna under the direction of Brad Styner and Mike Letourneau. Pandy “Dog Mad” Katakuzinos tried in vain to fit all our luggage into two vans to avoid Brad S. and Mike L. driving us practically all the way to Vancouver. Sadly he failed (had to have space for dog photographs ☺ ☺) so Brad and Mike very kindly drove us **all the way** there through the most spectacular scenery explaining how British Columbia only agreed to become part of Canada (in preference to joining the United States) if a railway line joining the West Coast with the East Coast was constructed within a specific time frame. The last spike was nailed in 1885 at Craigellachie, but not after 2 000 indentured Chinese had died in the unbelievably harsh conditions of winter constructions. On route we stopped at Rogers Pass for lunch.





The Calgary Jesters are very instrumental in organising the biggest junior tournament in Canada, they have well over 200 players present and support kids who don't have the wherewithal to make it. Keith Cretchley was very interested because, in a way, this is reflective of what he does in Knysna in his sports programme for underprivileged kids. His work does not go unnoticed here in Canada – the Toronto Jesters made a substantial contribution to his cause. (I've battled to find a nickname for Keith because he's so *modest*, always placing the interests of others before his own. So...Keith "The Gent" Cretchley deserves more support, I think, from the South African Jesters!)

The drive took us ten hours! And then our hosts, Brad S. and Mike L., had a few beers and set off for the return trip to Calgary, that's taking hospitality to an unsurpassable level! I really, really hope we are able to repay this quite extraordinary kindness one day – Canadian Jesters Tour or no-Canadian Jesters Tour! Even Pandy "Dog Mad" (who had declined to make a speech the night before – ever heard of a shy Greek?) was moved to spontaneously jump up and thank them for engaging in what was for them an epic 20-hour drive in one day! Phew!





After a pleasant night in a Holiday Inn on the west bank of a spectacular glaciated lake we set off for Vancouver – with *Indian Territory*, *Mountain Territory* and *Lake Territory* behind us (Territory must be pronounced with a Canadian accent to get the full effect!)

Vancouver



Mike Jackson, Bill Bowen, John Hungerford and Martin Kaffka met us at the Holiday Inn and immediately whisked us off to Mission Hill, a family wine estate, on the edge of Lake Okenagen. I was glad to meet Mike because my Dad had talked so fondly of him. The estate commanded a magnificent view of the valley and they provided us with a truly delicious lunch during which Camilla said to Bill, in the context of some arbitrary conversation about how people meet, “If my relationship with Steuart had been platonic, I would still be his secretary!” And so the banter with the B.C. (British Columbia) Jesters commenced.



After a spectacular drive into Vancouver we were introduced to our billets at the Hollyburn Club care of Mike and Bill. I was introduced to Allan Brown who took me and Camilla home to his wife Sue and his immaculate house. To my dismay I was once again baffled by the shower taps (I’m quite practical really!). Canadians quite often complain about life being predictable, but the shower taps in every club were different, some turned on by *turning* the tap, others by *pulling* the tap and others by *pressing* the tap and just when you were washing the soap out of your eyes (or the smell of defeat off your body) they would *turn off*! And we think we’ve got issues!



Next morning some of us, care of Bruce Russell, went off to play golf at Bowen Island while others went on a tour to Whistler with John Hungerford, Jim Geddes and “Uncle” Harry Bell-Irvine. Both parties recounted having a fun time as we met at Russell and Gillian Smith’s for dinner in a grand “old” Vancouver home. Bruce commenced the evening by handing out the golf awards. I gather that it is traditional that the visiting Jesters receive the “Horse’s Ass” award, which we duly did (“Badger/Rogie” and myself won the other two awards!) after which I gave my South Africa talk, slightly longer than previously because I felt compelled to include a tribute to the Canadian Jesters, as this was my last opportunity:





*“To the untrained ear the Canadian/USA accents sound the same
To the inexperienced eye their physical appearances look the same
To the first-time tourist their cities/shops and toys feel the same*

But Canadians are different...

*They are gentle people in a sincere way
They are friendly people in an honest way
They can party make no mistake
Yet they have a quiet manner that is intuitively hospitable
A refined culture that takes time to listen and to empathise
So, while we came together to play squash.....
We came away with a renewed faith in human nature and in the goodness of people”*





I was quite emotional when I read out these words (elaborated on later) because we have been so generously treated by all our billets, Bill Bowen was really moved, after he had said a few closing remarks we gave each other a big bear hug with tears of, dare I say it, Jester emotion rolling down our cheeks. I wonder whether Jock Burnett (founder of Jesters in 1928) knew what kind of camaraderie he was going to create, through squash, around the world. I think the 50 or so people who were there were all moved by our open display of affection and Jesterly decorum.

I gave six talks to the Canadian Jesters, all somewhat different from each other, mostly based on a newspaper article given to me *that day* by a hosting group. The last talk I gave was in response to an article by Gwynne Dyer, a London-based political journalist, given to me by John Osborn, a local Jester (my responses and the guts of my talk are in Appendix 3). I can't help feeling that many UK-based journalists deal with their own post-colonial guilt by rubbishing the achievements of African leadership.

Anyway, enough of that, the next morning found us at the Capilano Suspension Bridge care of Sue Kaffka. The combination of walking over this swaying bridge at a nerve-wracking height and a large alcohol supported lunch meant that we arrived at the Jericho Lawn Tennis Club "softened up", five of the seven of us lost 2-3, it was just that last piece of chocolate cake! That night we gathered at the Azia Restaurant, care of "Big Bad" John Hungerford for another superb meal after which some of us departed to the Steamworks Bar for a night cap. *Rocky-mountain-bear-fucker* (1/3 oz tequila, 1/3 oz Jack Daniel's® Tennessee whiskey, 1/3 oz Southern Comfort® peach liqueur) seemed to be the preferred shooter of the evening - makes our South African *Sex-on-the-beach*, *Springbok*, *Depthcharge* and *Jager Bomb* look a bit tame!



During the day Uncle Harry took the girls on a tour of Vancouver City, which was much appreciated; some of us were a little relieved that he is past his seductive prime! Next morning after some fun “Express doubles” organised by Sue Kaffka we convened at Capilano Country Club for an awesome lunch hosted by “Mad Dog” Mike Jackson. I say “Mad Dog” because he composed a song which he proudly rendered (see below), BUT prior to singing his now famous “Dog Song” Brad and Captain Mike received prizes for Left Court and Right Court best performances! Not bad for a brace of SA novices!





The Dogs They Held A Meeting

*The dogs they held a meeting, they came from near and far,
And some dogs came by airplane and others came by car,
They went into the meeting hall, each signed the visitors book,
And each dog hung his asshole upon his special hook.*

*The dogs they were all seated, each mother's son and sire,
When an ugly little mongrel stood up and shouted "Fire!"
The dogs they were in panic, they did not stop to look,
And each dog grabbed asshole from off the nearest hook.*

*The dogs they were all angry, they really were quite sore,
'Cause it's rough to wear an asshole that you've never worn before,
Perhaps this is the reason why a dog will leave his bone,
To sniff around another dog's asshole, in the hope of finding his own.*



That morning Mike composed this song which he rendered to all of us as a sing-along, to commemorate our encounter, particularly in respect of the chorus line.

"And this one for the South African Jesters"

*A belated introduction to some Jesters in our team,
With Kaffka, Brown and Osburn, it's really quite a scene,
They may be unable to save the day
But at least they still come out to play
We're too old for the squash court but useful in the bar.*

*Bill Bowen is our Chairman, he thinks he's in control,
He has it all well organized and loves the Chairman's role,
His motto, as always, let's go first class,
Even if we all fall flat on our ass,
We're too old for the squash court but useful in the bar.*

*And then we have Tregillas oozing charm from every pore,
With his pacemaker ticking as he glides across the floor,
Singles or doubles - it's all the same,
And after all, it's just a game.
We're too old for the squash court but useful in the bar.*

*Tony Goodson on the left wall, will always play the game,
With Broman on the other wall, it's good to share the blame,
They've played for many years it seems,
But now their wins are mostly dreams,
We're too old for the squash court but useful in the bar.*

*Kaffka's playing golf now, his squash is rather tame,
But he still plays when he's out of town where no one knows his name,
The North Shore closed - that one he blew,
The Innovic Open, he lost that too,
We're too old for the squash court but useful in the bar.*

*John Hungerford is losing it - he isn't quite the same,
Compared to twenty years ago, his game is very tame,
He loves a scotch and soda - or perhaps a shot of rye,
But when Debbie says it's time to jump - he modestly asks "How high?"
We're too old for the squash court but useful in the bar.*

*Harry Bell-Irving is a legend, and we are most impressed,
We hear about his exploits in countries east and west,
Some we believe and some we don't, and though we find no fault,
We know that when he winks his eye to take a pinch of salt,
We're too old for the squash court but useful in the bar.*

*Trig takes pills to stay awake and others to help him snooze,
With bandages on arm and leg, he'll very seldom lose,
With foot support from Doctor Scholl and a corset for his belly,
And for those very special nights a jar of royal jelly,
We're too old for the squash court but useful in the bar.*

*It's really quite amazing, Greg Desaulniers in his prime,
His lean and clean-cut looks, they have cheated Father Time,
You may think that clean living is the reason for it all,
But I know that the credit - all goes to Geritol.
We're too old for the squash court but useful in the bar.*

*We are sadly getting on in years, don't let it raise a frown
And Tim Bale is no longer the fastest man in town,
There's Smartie, and Marley and MacDougal too,
And as for Owen's fitness, there's nothing we can do.
We're too old for the squash court but useful in the bar.*

*Our Honorary member Harry, he's the keeper of the zoo,
They say that he has shares in the Rod and Gun pub too,
Our longest living Jester, quite beyond compare,
But put him on the squash court and there's not much there,
We're too old for the squash court but useful in the bar.*

*And now I have to end this song, my time is running out,
We all know by now what this game is all about,
As for our squash, we have little to boast,
So let's raise our glasses in a Jesters' Toast.
We're too old for the squash court but useful in the bar.*

The Last Supper



That evening Bill and Kate Bowen hosted a delicious salmon dinner at which “The Gent”, much to my surprise, told a “rude” joke about the sexual desires and frustrations of the Knysna Robin. “The Gent” had been so quiet throughout the trip that this sudden turn of humour surprised us all. But then true “Gents” always keep their best to last? And ultimately he did have the last word in a note penned to us on our return, see below!

“Dear S.A. Jester Friends,

Our long-awaited gathering at Johannesburg’s Oliver Tambo International Airport and the subsequent meeting of our team-mates sent ones mind spiralling back to the mid-60’s and that epic, star-studded Western.... The Magnificent Seven!!

For those unfamiliar with that inspiring yet simple story, the poor and hapless Mexican villagers seek the help of a veteran gun-fighter, Chris played by Yul Brunner, to take on the ruthless, pillaging bandits.

Chris has no ‘team’ but doggedly gathers together a posse of renegades who in spite of insurmountable odds, pledge their support and they undertake their epic journey. And so, confined to our seats aboard the splendid Airbus 300, the analogy unfolds.

Chris [Yul Brunner] a.k.a. our trusty Captain Mike Short, sternly checks on his charges, widely spaced in the plane to avoid any suspicion and potential poor behaviour so often associated with two or more loudmouths sitting together.

On board is the deadly knife-thrower James Coburn, slow to smile, often appearing aloof and somewhat detached, he is generally two paces behind the pack. Passionate about his country and struggling from one service box to the next is our own ‘Coburn’.... Stuart Pennington.

Then there is the impulsive gambler, Lee, played by Robert Vaughan – broke and desperate for any buck to be made. While not in the same financial plight, we have our own Michael Collins, physically so similar to the renowned actor, his budget stretched by the shopping exploits of his charming Cheryl.

Charles Bronson is the super cool gunfighter Bernardo O Reilly; while we have our own player of note and ‘number one’ in the team, Roger-Fuller-Good. Quite a different man once his Georgina had arrived.

Horst Bucholz plays the role of Chico, the youngster in the seven, rejected at first but who grows in stature to become a force to be reckoned with. Falling in love with every admiring peasant girl, he lives to ride off with the love of his life.... so proud we are of our Bradley Harber.

Brad Dexter is the old man in the team. Always needing a partner, he seldom fights alone...double trouble his forte... that’s Keith Cretchley!

Lee, [Robert Vaughan], is a Mexican bandit on the run, having just escaped from prison. Chubby, with a rather flat stubbled face, he has what appears to be a broken nose, and is no Greek God. Yes, Pandi Katakuzinos makes up the team and ‘The Magnificent Seven ‘ride out on their ‘Mission to Canada.’

Their objective’To Drink Canada Dry’ Sadly misunderstood by some of the younger team members who, unfamiliar with Canada’s famous soft drink, tried the unthinkable!!

As time passes however it soon becomes clear that it is not the S.A. posse that are the magnificent seven but instead the fortunate, privileged and grateful seven.

The true ‘MAGNIFICENT SEVEN’ – the Jesters and wives of HALIFAX – MONCTON – MONTREAL - OTTAWA - TORONTO - CALGARY and VANCOUVER!!!!

Our tour surpassed all expectations, has set new standards and will be remembered as the tour of Canada's 'Magnificent Seven'.

*In sincere Jesting spirit – to you, and to you and especially to you...
Thank you for a most wonderful tour!!!*

Keith "The Gent" Cretchley on behalf of the S.A. Jesters and Ladies"

At the end of the Last Supper us South African Jesters had a huddle that night and thanked Captain Mike for his stewardship – Good Man! Brad "Joker-in-the-Jesters" then stunned me and much to everyone's amusement enacting my demeanour on the squash court and my approach to airport security. Grumpy at the beginning of the warm up, exhausted at the end of it, I would become confused and ask for the score during it! Desperately trying to shake off the affects of the previous nights hospitality, sore from yesterdays North American doubles, anxiously wanting to avoid Captain Mike's peering "What's the score?", feverishly trying to give my opponent a game, feigning an attack of muscular atrophy, worried about "going commando" (can't remember everything!) I would, I admit, forget to SMILE while I was being tortured by a fresh-faced, enthusiastic, Canadian Jester. Just imagine then my response to airport security! Brad take-off brought the house down, but that's how it had become with us, we were genuinely enjoying each others company to the point where jest was ever-present!



Vancouver Island

Our last Monday was our last free day so Brad, Captain Mike and I (“Smiley”) went by “float plane” to Vancouver Island for the day, we were met by Gerry Poulton who took us around the delightful town of Victoria and the University campus as he explained life on the island. He is the current Canadian over 65 champion, fit and full of interesting perceptions. He is also the owner of the first automatic car ever to be driven on the island, 15 years old with only 147 000 km’s on the clock! (Jokes!) Don’t be misled, Vancouver Island is bigger than the UK, but his pursuit of fitness and the accommodating climate keeps him on his bicycle! It was a delight to spend the day with him.

Finally, and rather sadly, we gathered at Vancouver airport and bade farewell to “Mad Dog” Mike, “Big Bad” John, “Actuarial” Allan and “Lachrymose” Bill. It is often said that a “picture tells a thousand words”, well on June 2nd 2008, as the South African Jesters bade their final farewells, the tears in most peoples eyes told of a lot more, they told of an incredible set of friendships, they told of unforgettable experiences, and they told of indefatigable laughter. What a way to go!



The Girls

When men gather to hunt, or to play sport, or to do battle they all have something in common – the enjoyment of the pursuit at hand. They may be of different ages, have different jobs and come from different backgrounds, but they assemble nevertheless around a common cause – as it was in our case – a Jesters Squash Tour. BUT, along with them came their wives/partners, who may have nothing in common, except that they are in support of their men. So it could easily be that this collective may not get along, might place demands on their men (like shopping) that interfere with the pursuit at hand. This can be disruptive, complicating and interfering in the headspace of the hunter, such that he may miss the prey, miss the ball and forget the score!

We were blessed, our wives/partners really got along well: Pandy's "Dog Mad" Bernice was forever bubbly and ready to laugh; Mike C "Where's my credit card's" Cheryl was a delight with a glowing smile; "The Gent's" Anne, although quieter than Bernice and Cheryl (that's not difficult) was always interested in what we were doing and watched every game; "Badger/Rogie's" Georgina – less quiet than Anne, but quieter than Bernice and Cheryl (that too is not difficult) became part of the team despite her late arrival; and "Smiley's" Camilla, the latest arrival, quickly fitted in and surprised everyone by being not quite as shy as I had made her out to be. So as a twelve-some we played well as a team, and we had a huge time together.

This did not go unnoticed by the Canadians who often remarked on how much fun we were, best summed up by Brad Styner who said, "Of all the tours I have ever hosted, you South Africans are really special, your warmth, your friendliness and your energy have made it a real pleasure for us to be part of your tour", that would not be true if the women did not get along, but they did effortlessly and that made such a difference! Even the single men, Captain Mike and Bradley, despite trying miserably to take their hunting abilities into every bar in every city till the early hours of every morning enjoyed the company of these gorgeous girls of ours. "Mooi so!"



Canadians

To the untrained ear the Canadian and American accent is indistinguishable, to the inexperienced observer they physically look the same, and to the first-time tourist their cities, shops and toys feel the same. But Canadians are different; I found them friendly in an honest way; gentle in a sincere way, and culturally sensitive in a real way. Make no mistake they can party, but they have a quiet culture that is intuitively hospitable and refined. In the seven homes I stayed in there was a pleasant combination of taste, homeliness, warmth, modesty, unfathomable shower taps and in some instances disorder! I suppose brash, ostentatious, nouveau-riche, bad taste cultures exist everywhere, but I didn't sense it in the homes where we stayed. On the business-side - while entrepreneurship is important, so is lifestyle, the American "two weeks leave a year" syndrome is not evident here. Mostly Canadians are sensitive to the issues being raised by their native peoples, and mostly they demonstrated some understanding of the challenges faced in our South Africa, they are a worldly people. The media that I read, notably the *Globe and Mail*, was the most balanced I have read anywhere, including our own. And while Canadians are Western thinkers, they are neither presumptuous nor arrogant, and are *very* empathetic with the challenges faced by other countries. I suppose their own history mitigates for this, many of the people I stayed with were first or second generation migrants – they are proud of the opportunity Canada afforded their parents/grandparents and themselves, they know that every citizen has a different story to tell and they care about how visitors think about themselves and their country. Notwithstanding that I was with this *elite group of world famous squash players* we felt very welcome in Canada and we felt a real genuineness in the friendships we established. I came away with a renewed faith in human nature, and a renewed belief in the goodness of people – Thank you Proud Canadian Jesters!

Conclusion

I've enjoyed writing up this "History of the South African Jesters Tour to Canada 2008". I have tried to describe the events that took place - not the least of which is the bond of friendship that developed between us South African Jesters during the 18 days since meeting at O.R. Tambo in Johannesburg. But I have not been able to describe comprehensively the quite staggering hospitality and friendship, let alone organisation, that was extended to us by the Canadian Jesters. The extraordinary lengths that everyone went to in Halifax, Moncton, Montreal, Ottawa, Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver exceeded our wildest expectations. Every single day was jam packed with activities, squash, superb meals and great fun.

And our wives were looked after so well!

The Canadian Jesters demonstrated with distinction just what a wonderful Club Jesters is, why it promotes squash, and why it builds an international camaraderie that will endure for the generations of Jesters that will follow.

Sadly, I have not been able to mention everyone we met by name, but I have tried to capture the essence of fun we had, in the pursuit of what the Jesters Club stands for. But our heartfelt thanks to everyone that was involved. A big thank you!

One last word, a *very* special thanks to Captain Mike Short for his stalwart captaincy and to the Big Chief Michael Jackson for his leadership and co-ordination. You Canadian Jesters have given us, the South African Jesters, the very best time possible!

Steuart Pennington and the Team

POST SCRIPT LETTERS FROM OUR HOSTS

Dear Steuart,

It is truly hard to believe that a week has gone by since you and Camilla were here. I just wanted to say how much we enjoyed having you both here and that if any member of your families ever wish to come to Canada and Vancouver to please let us know. Anyone is welcome. Thank you also for speaking to us about South Africa. It was very informative and valuable to us, especially me who has visited your country. I can imagine what you have gone through this week, mailed piled high, sort pictures, cannot believe it has all happened, trip over, how was your trip, tired!

All the best to you both,

Sincerely

Bill

Hi Steuart,

Am almost fully dried out and back to normal after your visit which we all appreciated and enjoyed.

Scheduled for surgery on Monday next week. My wife thinks that it is a job on my ankle but it is probably a liver transplant after your visit!

Collectively, you constituted one of the most pleasant groups of reprobates I have ever encountered and we all thank you for coming to visit.

Will try to reconstruct the "Ode" song by the weekend and send both of them to you.

Very best wishes,

Mike J

Camilla and Steuart,

Sorry about my tardy response to your emails. We were happy to hear that you arrived home safely but felt that perhaps we had jinxed you with our sad tales of Air Canada! How unfortunate that the one bag that didn't arrive was the one with the gifts for the girls. I know how anxious they are at that age to get presents when Mom & Dad return from a trip. Hopefully it didn't take too long to get your bag.

All is well here and we must say how much we enjoyed your stay. Please do remember that you or your girls will always have a home to come to here in Vancouver. We hope you will send us pictures in December so that we can see the realization of Chateau Pennington.

All the best.

Sue Brown



Stewart

29 May 2008

Dear friends,

I'm not sure if anybody still keep family scrapbooks or albums of trips but, just in case any of you do, I collected some stuffings from your visit here. I suspect that, as you floated along, you might not have had room for this sort of thing. I also included a couple of pictures from the jet boating which Dennis Bishop kindly scanned for me.

Then my whimsical tendencies rather took over which explains why a rather weak item of doggerel is included. It started out as our recollections but these things tend to take on a life of their own and it morphed into your imagined memory. You may find it amusing.

Seriously we all greatly enjoyed your visit and being given the opportunity to meet nice people from far away lands to repay some of the hospitality lavished on Canadian Jesters who have visited South Africa and, above all, to make new friends.

Cheers.

Kerry Martin
Quebec Jesters.

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Letter from Captain Mike to the Canadian Jesters introducing this narrative

To the President of the Canadian Jesters (Michael Jackson), all the Canadian Regional Chairmen (Marc Lalonde, Kerry Martin, Michael Hobart, Delton Gray, Bill Bowen) and to Tom Hori and Ray Souchereau (Halifax), Vinnie Taylor (Ottawa) and Mike LeTourneau (Calgary) and all those who hosted functions, organised and played squash against us, accompanied us on tours, fetched and carried us, host us and to all the Candian Jesters.

You probably thought I have been inconsiderate in not having written to all of you earlier after our magnificent tour of Canada. The reason why I have waited till now is because we have been busy compiling a narrative of our epic tour of Canada together with some pictures of each region, as well as including Steuart's various letters to newspapers, Keith's comparison of us to the characters from the movie "The Magnificent Seven", and for the benefit of the SA Jesters the words to the "Dog Song", which I am sure most of you are familiar with!!!! I now would formally like to thank you for hosting us in your region and to say how grateful we were for the amount of time and effort you went to, to ensure we had an unforgettable experience with you in your region. It gives me great pleasure to attach the above and I hope you will find this informative, entertaining, humorous and light hearted but more importantly be able to sense and appreciate our gratitude to all of the different regions who contributed to making this tour so memorable for all of us. Please can you kindly forward this email to all the Jesters in your region.

I cannot begin to describe how well we were treated in each stop and how warm and friendly all the Canadian Jesters were to us. The hospitality was absolutely fantastic and I know that the camaraderie and friendships will last a lifetime. We were all so impressed with not only how magnificent the sights and golf courses of Canada are, but more importantly how proud you all are of your country and being Canadian. Regretfully we were only with you for a couple of nights on each occasion and we wish we could have stayed longer, although my friend and drinking buddy Mike Jackson may feel otherwise, but I just wanted to tell you what a magnificent group of players I was fortunate to captain, and words cannot describe how brilliant their wives were and personally for me it was a pleasure for me to be afforded the opportunity to accompany them on tour - we all got along so well from the moment we left SA and we laughed and joked our way across the width of Canada from east to west coast. We left Canada with sad hearts when the time came to say goodbye but with such wonderful memories and loads of pictures. We can't wait for the next Canadian tour to SA, and hopefully those lucky fellows who tour SA will also leave absolutely exhausted, with sore livers and swollen stomachs, yet having seen and experienced the rich diversity SA has to offer in it's culture, sights and people.

There were many highlights of our tour and were we to mention each and everyone our narrative would have been a "Harry Potter" novel, but for us in each region, and forgive me if I have excluded some as there were many more highlights, but the Lobster evening, Jorggins Fossil Centre, the sunset at Bill Stewart's house overlooking Shediac Bay, our guided tour of Old Montreal, playing North American Doubles for the first time at the Atwater Club and then in Toronto and Vancouver, our trip on a jet boat accross the Lachine Rapids on the St. Lawrance river, feeding animals we had never seen before at Omega Game Reserve, The Museum of Civilization and Parliament buildings in Ottawa, our train trip to Toronto, the spring party with approximately 140 members at Toronto Lawn and Tennis, Niagara Falls, our breakfast at the Royal Canadian Yacht Club, the Bluejays baseball game, Banff and Lake Louise, our trip through the spectacular Rockies to Kelowna, Mission Hill Winery, Whistler, Capilano suspension bridge and club where we had our last formal luncheon and the famous "Dog Song", all of which goes to illustrate what an awesome trip you all so kindly arranged for us and a trip we believe not many Canadians have experienced in their lifetime, so as Keith Cretchley so aptly put it "To you, and you and especially you" thank you very much indeed from the bottom of our hearts.

I have included the email addresses of all the SA players for your information, and reiterate what I said that we look forward to keeping in touch and if at any time there is anyone who would like to come to South Africa, even if it is not part of an official Jesters tour, we would all be delighted and elated to accommodate you and your family.

Thank you to all those who have sent emails and Kerry Martin for your package with brochures etc of Montreal thank you very much indeed. Kerry please can you send me Mike Wilson's email address.

Once again thank you all our friends very much indeed.

Kindest regards
Mike Short

Appendix 1:

Letter to Ottawa Citizen

Sir,

I am a South African on a 20 day squash tour of Canada. Our party of 12 have been in awe of the beauty of your country as we have been generously hosted by the Canadian Jesters Squash Club. This morning I read your editorial of "Africans killing Africans" (May 22nd), and while we, as South Africans, deplore the xenophobic violence that is taking place in some of our townships, there are a number of editorial statements you made which are inaccurate.

During the nine years of President Mbeki's tenure the South African economy has been turned from nearly bankrupt to the most prosperous period in our history. Our Johannesburg Stock Exchange has outperformed, in dollar terms, the Dow and the FTSE by a factor of three. We have delivered free housing, electricity and water, to the poorest 25% of our populations (+/- 12 million people) and our social grant system has been extended to 12.5 million people, 70% of which are children, from 2 million in 1994 (the year of our transition to democracy).

We have not "failed to create the peaceful and prosperous society of Nelson Mandela's great vision.". Our black middle class has exploded, our car sales have doubled in three years and, the improvement in our property prices tops the Economist's annual global survey. While it is true that Mbeki tried to disconnect the relationship between HIV and Aids some five years back, South Africa's systematic roll-out, both corporate and governmental, of anti-retrovirals has attracted global recognition as best practice.

Most Euro-centric commentators do not understand the complexity of trying to forge African solidarity. South Africa houses the African parliament, the 54 member countries have a complex history of French, German, Portugese, Italian and English occupation, many of which support President Mugabe's open defiance of the west. Holding the African Union (AU) together, given the corrupt past of the Organization of African Unity (OAU), delivering on the African Renaissance, and promoting the New Partnership for African development (NEPAD), has been a passion of Mbeki's tenure. Cracking down on Zimbabwe (in whatever form that may have taken) could well have divided the AU and caused its collapse, something Mbeki would not have wanted to precipitate.

Dealing with refugees is complex. We have Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Lesotho, and Swaziland on our geographical borders with Zambia, Malawi, and Angola close by. It is estimated that four and six million people, desperate for work, have crossed the +/- 3500 kilometres of our border illegally (legal options are available). Given the tribal character of Africa, and the history of antagonism that some of these tribes have for each other, xenophobic flare-ups are inevitable.

Yes, you are right when you say "South Africa is struggling to define its own future". We are a society in transition battling with the challenges of transformation. But we are a good people. 93% of South Africans "give" to social causes every month; and we are a forgiving people, our democratic transition from a tyrannical regime and our Truth and Reconciliation Commission remains a marvel in the modern world; and we are a hopeful people, the majority of South Africans are more optimistic about the future now than ever in our past. We have achieved economically, politically, and socially in a manner that no-one, in particular Euro-centric Afro-pessimists, believed possible 14 years ago.

As a white South African I am proud of my country, our people, our culture, and our achievements. I have been sharing this with your good people, so I hope you will do me the courtesy of publishing this letter in the Ottawa Citizen, despite the fact that it exceeds 300 words!

Steuart Pennington
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Appendix 2:

Letter to Toronto Globe & Mail

Sir, I am a South African travelling through this beautiful country. Obviously I am saddened by the negative press my country is receiving during this time of xenophobic violence, but your report to-day by Sir Max Hastings "The Root Cause, Severe Poverty has doubled in a Decade" (May 24) needs to be challenged. During the past decade our Social Grant system has been extended from 2 million people in 1996 to 12.5 million people to-day, 70% of whom are children. Since 1996 we have built 2.5 million houses for the poor and brought fresh water and electricity to 17 million citizens, who didn't have it before. GDP per capita has grown by 20% over the past 5 years and Statistics SA reports that the income of the poorest 10% of our population has improved by 70% over the same period. That poverty remains a big issue in South Africa is true, that poverty has doubled over the past decade is not the truth. Respected journalists should check their facts.

Steuart Pennington

Appendix 3:

Letter to Gwynne Dyer

Dear Gwynne,

I was given your article "South Africa and the Immigrants" by John Osborn, a Canadian Jester (squash player) while I was on tour across the length and breadth of Canada. This has been a bad time for South Africa, and I suppose it is only natural that journalists, particularly from afar, will climb in to the unhappy reality of xenophobic violence in our country. It's a pity that in their reporting on this awful set of events they choose to have a go at a whole number of other issues

that they know little about. Your article is a case in point. I am the author and co-editor of six books on South Africa, my views reflect those of the 175 prominent South Africans who have contributed to our “South Africa – The Good News” series and website www.sagoodnews.co.za. I trust you will send this response on to your correspondents.

You wrote: *It was looking ugly there for a few days, with mobs of South Africans in townships around Johannesburg randomly murdering several dozen “foreigners” (migrants from other African countries) and injuring several hundred. But now President Thabo Mbeki has acted decisively: he has announced the establishment of a panel of inquiry into the violence. That should fix it.*

Just in case he gets impatient while waiting for the panel’s report, however, I can tell him what it will say – or at least, what it should say. It should say that the root problem was his own government’s “non-interventionist” policy on immigration: its refusal to control or even count the number of people arriving in South Africa from other African countries.

The mere fact that the commonly used estimate is “three to five million” illegal immigrants says it all: the authorities really have no idea how many foreigners are in South Africa. But the higher estimate is probably closer to the truth, for some four million people have left Zimbabwe alone to seek work abroad, and almost all of them have gone to South Africa.

This “open borders” non-policy had high motives. Many of South Africa’s current leaders are men and women who spent decades in exile during the fight against apartheid, and the migrants come mostly from the countries that gave them shelter at that time. How can they turn away people from those countries – from Zimbabwe, above all – now that the shoe is on the other foot?

My response: We don’t have an “open border” non-policy. But with a border that neighbours Namibia, Botswana, Zimbabwe, Mozambique, Swaziland and Lesotho, with Angola, Zambia and Malawi close by, and with its many thousands of kilometres long it is difficult to manage. There is a legal process, and people are reported all the time. Aside from this your view personifies Euro-centrism “I can tell him what it will say” and unsympathetic to the challenge of poverty in Sub-Saharan Africa.

You wrote: *It is an honourable sentiment, but more easily experienced if, like South Africa’s current leaders, you lead a secure and comfortable life in one of the nicer northern suburbs of Johannesburg. If you happen to live in Alexandra township (not all that far from those pleasant suburbs) amidst garbage and violence and chronic poverty, and you don’t have a job, it’s a little harder to access such noble emotions – because one-tenth of the people in the country are illegal immigrants, and lots of them do have jobs.*

Miserable, underpaid jobs, for the most part, but in a country where the true unemployment rate is somewhere near half, there are bound to be great many people who resent foreigners getting any jobs at all. Especially because there is some truth in the complaint of poor and uneducated South Africans that the illegal immigrants get the unskilled jobs because employers can pay them less and they won’t dare complain.

My response: Not true, most commentators do not use the expanded definition of poverty, and prefer to use the definition that relates to job seekers, that has fallen from 27% to 23% in the last five years with 2.5 million net new jobs created over the same period at +/- 500 000 per annum. In fairness, you should point out that just ten years ago our economy was running with a 10% deficit and was growing at 0.5%, today we have a budget surplus and a growth rate of +/- 4-5%. No-one predicted that five years ago.

None of this justifies murder, but it does begin to explain it. Thabo Mbeki was incredibly foolish to assume that he could just let foreigners flood into the country and not expose them to a popular backlash. The South African media are filled with self-flagellating editorials that all basically ask “What kind of people are we if we can behave like this?” The answer is: not saintly inhabitants of some imagined “rainbow nation” that has risen above the normal human plane, just ordinary people under pressure and behaving badly.

You obviously, with comments like the above, have no concept of Ubuntu. African people are not yet like the European world, scared of itself, terrified of terrorists, and anxious about being overwhelmed by other European cultures.

We are caring, forgiving people, we are appalled by xenophobic violence and we believe we have a role to play in “adopting” other cultures.

Last week in Italy, other ordinary people threw Molotov cocktails into Gypsy camps and burnt them down. Most of those people have jobs, live in comfortable surroundings, and eat quite well, and they STILL behaved badly. There are only about 150 000 Gypsies in Italy, half of whom have been there since the 15th century. There are less than a quarter of one percent of the population, and yet 68 percent of Italians want them all expelled.

The South African poor have been amazingly patient as year after year went by – fourteen years now since the end of apartheid – when so little has changed for the better in their lives. The black poor still loyally vote for the African National congress (ANC), but their anger was going to burst out somewhere or other, sooner or later. By holding the door open to so many illegal immigrants, the government has guaranteed that they would be the primary target.

A lot has changed for the poor over the past fourteen years: 2.5 million houses have been built; 17 million people have been delivered fresh water and electricity who did not previously receive it; many schools are now free; our Social Grant System now covers 12.5 million people (70% of whom are children) from 2 million twelve years ago. According to SATSA the income of the poorest 10% of our population has grown by 70% over the past five years. And GDP per capita has improved 20% over the last five years. I challenge you to show me another country that has done so much for the poorest 25% of its population in just twelve years. .

Maybe this is some Machiavellian plan to divert popular anger from the government itself, but probably not. It’s just that the leaders don’t see what has been happening to ordinary people. How else could Thabo Mbeki go on defending Robert Mugabe, the destroyer of Zimbabwe, year after year, when Mugabe’s misdeeds were the main reason that this enormous wave of illegal immigrants struck South Africa?

Although I do not support the extent of “quiet diplomacy” on Zimbabwe I think many journalists who write about this do not understand dynamics on the African continent as a whole. We all know about the failed OAU, and we know that Mbeki’s is passionate for the success of the AU, the African Renaissance and NEPAD and we also know that Mugabe enjoys considerable popularity in Africa, that he receives standing ovations in the UN. Mbeki is obviously anxious that a crackdown on Zimbabwe would result in a split in the AU and the end to his dream for an African Renaissance and NEPAD. He does not want to take that risk, he does not want the AU to fail – and anyway he is acting on behalf of SADC as their appointed mediator. He has achieved considerable success with the election process in Zimbabwe. Too bad Mugabe has given the world his finger and defied the AU and SADC. What would you encourage as his next step?

Justice Malala, whose column appear in The Times (the online version of South Africa's Sunday Times), nailed it on Monday when he wrote: "(Our) people are behaving like barbarians because the ANC has failed – despite numerous warnings – to act on burning issues that are well known for having sparked similar eruptions across the globe...

"The Mbeki government's refusal to even acknowledge the crisis in Zimbabwe has resulted in as many as 3 million Zimbabweans walking the streets of South Africa... Mbeki's resolute refusal to address the crisis in Zimbabwe – and his friendship with President Robert Mugabe – has brought them here. His block-headedness is directly responsible for the eruption of xenophobia."

Such plain talk is not "blaming the victim." It is recognising realities, which is the first step to addressing them. And where the despairing poor of South Africa should be addressing their anger is not at helpless Zimbabweans but at the president who let this human catastrophe happen.

Remember Mbeki lost the battle for a third term as President of the ANC, he and his executive were summarily dismissed and replaced by the "people's vote". That is democracy in action, so who are you playing, the man or the ball, we may not like Zuma, but the "people" do.

I just wish journalists like you would first get your facts right and secondly try to understand Africa and the African way instead of imposing your Euro-centricity on our continent. It's time to move on!

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