

A Maturing Family and Government Service



A YEAR OR TWO BEFORE, still in the time of the old evil regime, I had been approached to become a director of SAFCOL (the S.A. Forestry Company Ltd.) newly established to take over the commercial forestry and sawmilling activities of the Department of Forestry and Water Affairs. I accepted with some hesitation, the Minister at the time being General Magnus Malan, the proponent of “total onslaught”. He looked me over at the official opening tea and said “Gevisser, I know all about you”. I responded that I knew quite a bit about him too! That was our only meeting, as SAFCOL immediately became the responsibility of the Minister for Public Enterprises, Dawid de Villiers, with whom I got on well. Shortly after this I was appointed Deputy Chairman by the new Mandela cabinet. Our new Minister was Stella Sigcau and on the retirement of Leendert Dekker as Chairman, the cabinet appointed me in his place. This, in 1995, at age 69, was the beginning of the final phase of my professional and business career.

It was a marvellous period in South Africa, filled with promise and joy and the culmination for many of us of a dream that had been constantly with us for most of our lives. There was also and properly some introspection. I wrote a piece for the *Weekly Mail* at the time which encapsulates how I felt then, and even now.

Election Musings

Like all of us, I have been deeply plunged into liberation rhetoric. I have been told by President Mandela and Thabo Mbeki that I am free at last. Ex-President de Klerk and Dawie de Villiers have informed me that we have wiped out the stain of apartheid and that we are now and suddenly

brothers in a truly democratic land. Acquaintances whom I know have been fervent apostles of apartheid are professing joy at their liberation from the white man's burden.

I am, in turn, sickened by the hypocrisy and exhilarated by events. I would like to go out into the streets to dance and sing and celebrate, but I am constrained. It is not my party. It is not my celebration. The day belongs to those who have really suffered, not to those of us who have been bystanders; involved bystanders perhaps, but not deep and visceral participants.

I talk to a black friend, trying hard to feel what he is feeling. He has been involved in the struggle, an activist, a Robben Island graduate, a successful, strong, self-made man in the white business world, a long-time fighter for the full freedom which is suddenly his. I feel something of his joy, of the final equality which the vote brought to him when he cast it in the same schoolroom in which he was arrested so many years ago. But I know that I can never feel the ecstasy and the pride and sense of achievement that must be his, that brings a moistness to the eyes of a strong man. It must be an emotion with no equal in a human lifetime.

For the only time in the many years that I have lived and vicariously suffered in my native land, I wish that I could feel what he is feeling. I wish today that I were black.

The move from a busy and structured office environment to an office at home was not quite the shock that I had anticipated. Perhaps that was because I had always run a garden office in a very relaxed and informal style. I had also brought my main office furniture with me and retained the services of my secretary, Ida, and I had already grown comfortable in my new governmental positions.

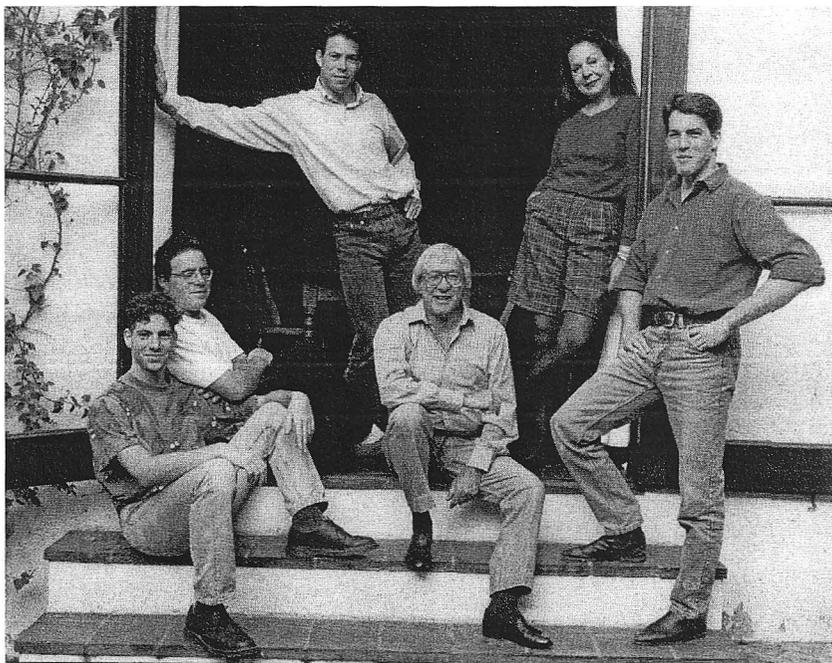
There were of course immediate and marked differences. My general support system was gone! I found myself answering the front door-bell, the second telephone, dealing with everyday minor domestic crises in Hedda's frequent absences from home. I was also clearing my post-box, opening my mail, licking my own stamps, doing a host of things that I never knew had to be done. I have, at least, a very clear and admiring view of the myriad of minor things that form part of a secretary's working life. Let me however say at once that I have thoroughly enjoyed most of this. There is a quiet satisfaction in doing little things for oneself that have in the past always been done by others.

The Unlikely Forester

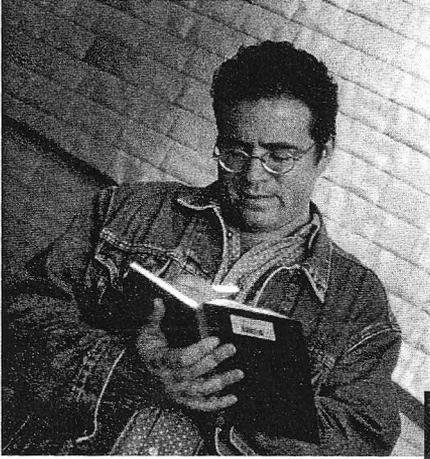
The chief difference however was the change of pace and pressure. There are no set hours to arrive and to depart, or to impress the staff with one's diligence, but there is nevertheless a residual discipline. It is pleasant to check e-mail and the fax and answering machine after a night out, or to spend an hour at your desk over a weekend. One's business life becomes integrated with one's home life in an atmosphere devoid of stress. I enjoyed it! I was and am more my own master than I have ever been.

Whilst all of this was in train our four sons had advanced with us. We were now in the mid 1990s. At that stage Mark was approaching 30, Antony 27, John 25 and Peter 23. They were all very different people, very independent, with widely differing careers and interests.

Hedda and I had decided during their school years that if they showed any interest at all in our suggestion, they should have their post-school education overseas, the objective being to provide them with a mature framework in which to decide whether or not to remain in a South Africa that was then in the throes of the worst phase of apartheid nationalism. A bloody climax appeared increasingly probable.



At home in Johannesburg, circa 1995



*Mark at the Guggenheim Museum
in Bilbao, 2004*

Chetty, 2005



Mark had been head-boy of Redhill, had a clean sweep of A's in Matric, and had no difficulty in being accepted at Yale for a BA degree in English and Creative Writing. He did brilliantly, made many friends and graduated *magna cum laude*, with a handful of prestigious prizes thrown in.

He became an intern at *The New Nation*, the bible of the radical left, and then a feature writer for the *Village Voice*. The excitement of the new South Africa proved irresistible and he returned to become a highly regarded political analyst and biographer. He had found in his late teens strong gay inclinations, and came out while he was at Yale. This was a considerable shock to us for emotional rather than logical reasons. We have no homophobia.

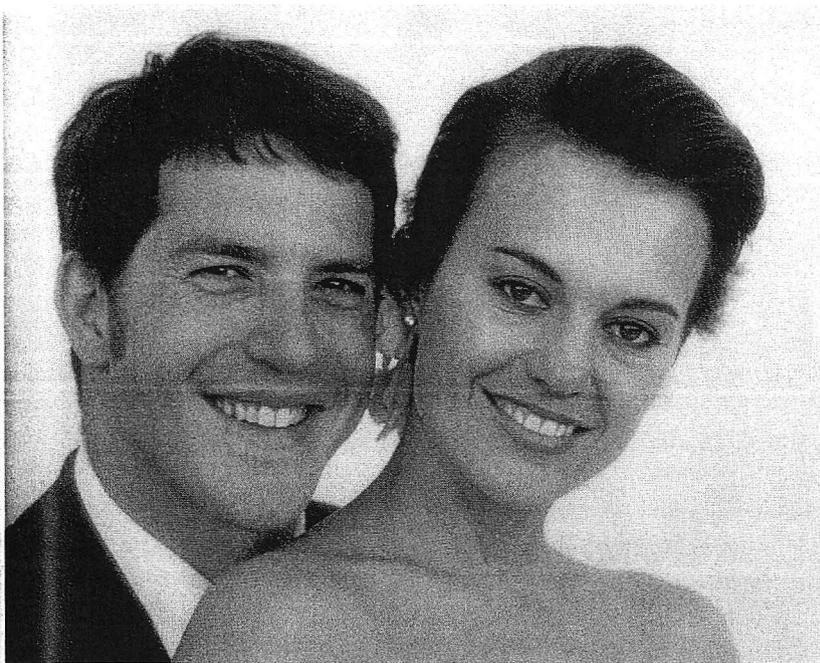
The shock passed in time, short for me and somewhat longer for Hedda. There are no residual feelings other than a regret that Mark is not part of the mainstream. He and his partner of many years, Chetty, a historian and educationist, are a compatible, interesting and loving pair. Chetty has become a close and welcome part of our family.

Mark is today acknowledged as being at the apex of the profession of writing and journalism. His biography of President Mbeki, on which he is currently heavily engaged, is eagerly awaited. He is also very involved with the design and execution of the many cultural aspects of the new Constitution Hill.

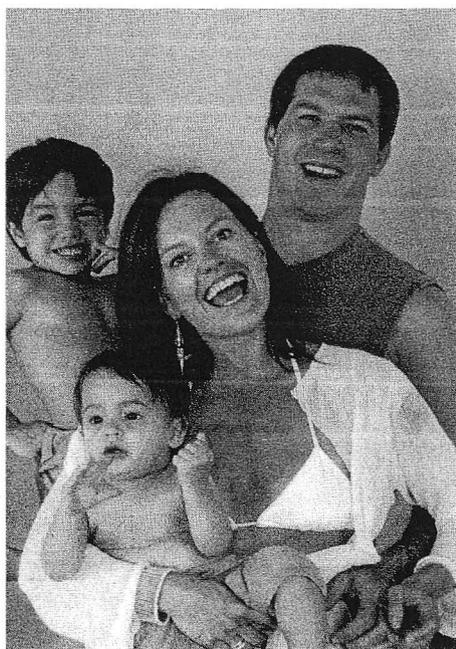
Antony, an excellent sportsman and a great personality – sharp, clever, witty – was also head boy at Redhill, and decided to go to the University of Cape Town to do BA and LLB degrees. He both plays and works hard and has a remarkable memory. He graduated with ease, and elected to move to London where he studied to become a barrister, successfully being elected to Grays Inn, where he practised for a short period. Memories of South African sunshine and the way of life soon however overcame the grey London weather and the stuffiness of the London Bar. He returned to South Africa, requalified as an advocate of the Supreme Court and opened his bar practice, specialising mostly in labour law matters. After some years however he decided that he was not enjoying the practice of the law under South African conditions, and left the Bar to seek an occupation and life-style more to his liking. He became a highly regarded arbitrator, concerned mainly with labour law disputes, but subsequently returned to London to investigate a business career in partnership with his fiancée, Francesca Verner, whom he married in 2006. She is a delightful, bubbly Irish girl and a talented dress designer. She is a very welcome addition to our expanding family.

John, a superb athlete, decided on a different course and elected to study for his A-levels at an English public school. After much deliberation Harrow was chosen, and it was an excellent choice. John made many close friends, played first XV rugby, captained the athletics team, and became head of house, “head Jew”, and a school monitor – unheard of for a new boy. He still jointly holds the Middlesex junior record for the 400 metres. He returned to the University of Cape Town to take a BA and then an Honours degree in Political Science. He became a very active and very entrepreneurial media consultant. In that capacity he met Justine Georgeu, a delightful, most attractive and highly successful events organiser. It took little time for them to recognise that this was to be a happy union and they were married in Franschoek in September 2000. The wedding was, from a religious viewpoint, uniquely successful. It was presided over jointly by a lady Rabbi and a Christian minister and the resulting service was memorable and deeply affected all of us who witnessed it.

John and Justine have moved to London where John is a successful part of a remarkable international group owned by the John Moshal family. Justine



John and Justine on their wedding day, 19 March 2000



John and Justine with Leo and Joshua, 2005

presented us with our first grandchild, Leo, born on 20 October 2002 and now a delightful three year old who has totally captured our hearts. A second son, Joshua, has now joined him. The male Gevisser gene continues strong!

Peter – yet another Redhill head-boy – decided on an American university and was accepted at Brown where he had a happy four years. He emerged determined to be an actor, spent a few months on the fringe of the entertainment industry in New York, and then was accepted for the three-year course at the Drama Centre in Hampstead. It is a gruelling and difficult course, made deliberately so by the faculty whose approach is to prepare their students for a tough, unfriendly and difficult career. Peter survived, and has embarked on his professional career in London and Los Angeles. He has had numerous supporting roles in film and TV and on stage and in BBC radio plays. He is also involved in script writing and film making and editing. His future lies clearly in that world.



Peter, 2004

There he met Katrin Cartlidge with whom he lived very happily in Hampstead. Katrin was an accomplished actress with a string of stage and film credits to her name, the most prestigious of which was a recent *Evening Standard* “Actress of the Year” award. She was a delight – amusing, interested, clever, and intensely serious and single-minded

about her profession. Then came the most traumatic event that has ever been experienced in our close family. Katrin died from an undiagnosed illness within 36 hours of its onset. Peter was with her for this whole awful period. An autopsy disclosed a very rare growth on the adrenal gland. Nothing could have been done to save her.

They had been together for eight years in a loving and uniquely mutually supportive partnership. She was on the brink of international acclaim, universally admired for her professionalism and her relationship with her colleagues. She was mourned not only as a friend but as an irreplaceable loss to the acting profession. An obituary that is appended attests to this (Appendix v). Peter was deeply involved with her as companion and lover and as both critic and pupil. He was devastated by the suddenness and magnitude of his loss. It is now three years since her death. He has come to terms with normal life, lovingly supported by his family and by a large number of devoted and concerned friends.

We all miss Katrin. She came quietly and somewhat diffidently into our lives. At the end she was lovingly integrated into our family. She loved, and was loved by Peter's three brothers and by Justine, and had developed a natural and affectionate relationship with Hedda and me. She was an admired and loved daughter-in-law.

Simultaneous with Katrin's death and the subsequent cremation and memorial services, Justine, our other daughter-in-law was in the final few months of her pregnancy. She had developed a very close bond with Peter and Katrin, and Peter turned to her and John for solace and support. Their flat became his temporary home as it was for all of us who flew to London to be with Peter. John and Justine's support, both practical and emotional, was the rock to which we all clung during these sad days.

All four sons of course left home but happily they are all affectionately close to one another and appear to enjoy fraternal company at least as much as that of non-family. We saw all of them often until Peter and John emigrated, and then Antony, and it was an unusual week when they had not all visited or been in touch, often for Sunday lunch, or a drop-in lunch with father during the week.

Peter and John's and Justine's and Antony's absence is strongly felt by all, but constant telephoning and internet contact among all family members keeps them in close touch. There is little of family interest that does not speed immediately along the family grapevine.

Peter is now in a happy relationship with Liza Chambers whom he first met when they were students together at Brown. She obtained a Master's degree in Conflict Resolution at Harvard and then co-founded,

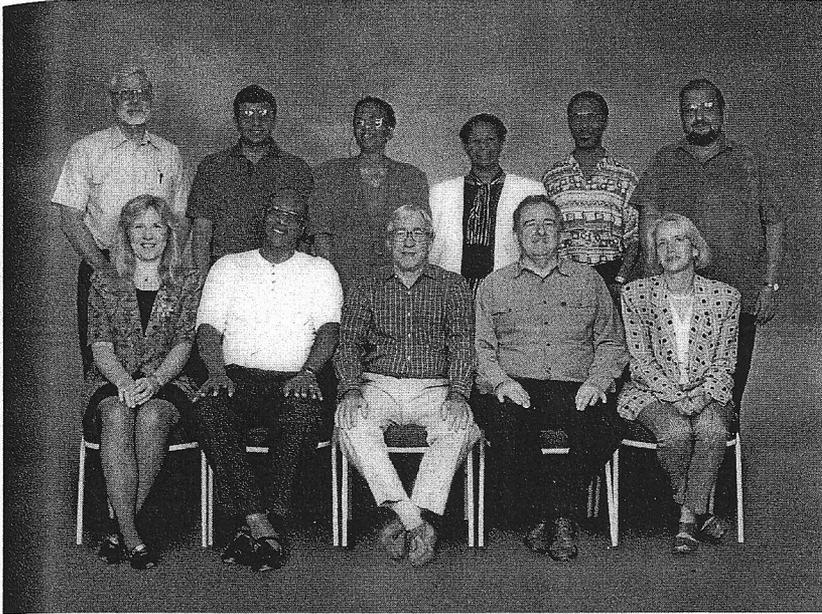
and currently runs a non-profit organisation that encourages dialogue between American and Muslim students – the latter at universities throughout the Arab world. We all greatly enjoy her warmth, intelligence and company. Her professional knowledge and advice have been helpful to me in the planning of my possible future academic career.

On the business front, my SAFCOL years as Chairman had begun, both time-consuming and exciting, and unexpected for a 69-year-old who would ordinarily have been firmly in retirement.

I had inherited a rainbow Board of Directors and a difficult task. My Board consisted of three black women, two black men, two Indian men, one coloured man, one white woman, and two white men other than myself. This was admirable from a colour mix viewpoint in the new South Africa but unfortunately the normal corporate governance approach to Board appointments was totally lacking. Skills and experience were not a factor in the new appointments which were a mix of country schoolteacher, political activist, ex-homelands functionary, trade-unionist, shopkeeper and conservationist. There was literally no connection with commercial forestry or indeed with profit-oriented business.

On an early field trip with the new Board I was told, in all seriousness, that I must have been joking when I had said that paper was made from trees! Finally, to add to my early problems, not one of the new appointees had ever sat on a proper Board of Directors. There was obviously no understanding or appreciation of figures or the profit element. Profits just “sort of happened” and were necessary for social upliftment. Punctuality was an unknown concept and meetings scheduled for 08.30 often did not have a quorum until 10 a.m. I was routinely accused of being racist, autocratic, impatient, undemocratic and gender-insensitive and it is possible that some of this was true, but I was far from being alone in having to come to grips with the new South Africa. In fact both sides had to learn, and we did. The Board came to accept that much of what I asked from them was necessary if the company was to be properly run, and I became – somewhat uncharacteristically – more patient and understanding. In the face of very considerable problems the Board rapidly bonded together and was a solid front. It was a rare decision that was not unanimous, although most were closely debated, albeit sometimes with suspect understanding.

These problems were heightened by the character of the personnel of the Department of Public Enterprises, the custodian and representative of the State’s one hundred per cent holding in the company. The newly-appointed Minister, Stella Sigcau, while being friendly and approachable had little experience of the business world and of the complexities



The Rainbow Board, S.A. Forestry Company Ltd., 1997

*Standing, from left: LW Dekker, D Konar, SD Nene, JZ Mariotti, PM Mbokodi, O Ganie
Seated: BS McBean, MC Ntuli, DJ Gevisser, MJC van Vuuren, HM Dolny*

inherent in the privatisation of Government enterprises, of which she was now in control. She had trained as a primary school teacher, was very briefly President of the Transkei Bantustan, but – and this appeared to be her over-riding qualification for a cabinet position – was a Princess of the royal Pondo household. She appointed a staff of similar inexperience and a Director-General who preached openly against the philosophy of privatisation which was the *raison d’etre* for his Department! Sigcau was also not strong politically and was no match for Kader Asmal, the Minister of Water Affairs & Forestry, who despite their very marked differences in physical stature, persuaded her into accepting his views of the privatisation process.

The result of all of this was a constant attempt by officials to interfere with the operation of a commercial company, and a tragic slowing down of the privatisation process that led eventually to the withdrawal of major international companies such as Weyerhaeuser, and a reduction in the value of SAFCOL’s assets from an original estimate of one and a half billion rand to little more than a third of that which may eventually flow to the fiscus. A secondary result was that it rapidly became clear to me that the title of “non-executive chairman” was a misnomer. I spent

at least sixty percent of my time on SAFCOL affairs, largely as a buffer between the company and government.

On the operational side things were going well despite the demotivating effect on staff of a privatisation schedule that was regularly extended. The original three year programme was to take ten years and is still incomplete. The effects of this on morale, on costs and profits and on lost opportunities are incalculable. This history is a microcosm of what was happening elsewhere in Government and in parastatal enterprises. It was, in retrospect, unavoidable in the early years of the change-over from the apartheid regime to the new South Africa, representatives of which came to their new positions, both high and low, with almost no experience or training. We still live with this, but there is a remarkably rapid reduction of its effects.

Dr. Tienie van Vuuren, who had been head of the Pretoria University Business School, was appointed as Chief Executive Officer. It was an inspired appointment and SAFCOL moved rapidly from the forty million rand annual loss that it had inherited to a forty million rand profit in the first eighteen months of its existence. This was achieved by three major factors – a reduction in a grossly large staff, a newly-motivated commercially oriented ethos and a significant increase in log prices which had been pegged at very low subsidised levels. SAFCOL took its rightful place as a world leader in plantation forestry.

During much of this period I had another position – unpaid and honorary – as forestry adviser to Kader Asmal. We had met through Mark, and he originally wanted me on his payroll, which I refused. I definitely wanted to be my own man. I wrote some of his early forestry speeches and we became good friends. Unfortunately we did not always see eye-to-eye on SAFCOL's future or on his approach to the forest industry which was interpreted as not being "industry-friendly". The new Forest Act and Water Act did much to frighten off potential international investors. We remain friends but sadly now rarely meet.

His successor, Ronnie Kasrils, immediately re-appointed me as his adviser, but it rapidly became apparent that he had to choose between the advice coming from me and that of his full-time advisers, Lael Bethlehem and Janet Love. My appointment quietly lapsed.

I had assumed that it was very likely that my SAFCOL situation would change at the Annual General Meeting of the company in December 2001 at which directors were routinely appointed. I had not been an easy Chairman, being in frequent and vocal opposition to shareholder (i.e. Government) policies and direction and having been very critical of many failures in communication, punctuality, corporate

governance. My age would have been an easy excuse for my replacement which could have been done without recrimination or criticism. I fully expected either to be retired or to be relegated to a directorship. To my surprise, I was re-appointed as Chairman for a further year but my independence was somewhat hobbled by the replacement of five of the old Board by Government officials. I now had, in place of a Board which fully understood and supported the SAFCOL views which had been propagated, often to the displeasure of the shareholder, Board members who were part of that shareholder. The group of new appointees included Lael, and officials from Public Enterprises and the Department of Finance. In my welcoming remarks to them I underlined their fiduciary duties as directors which could well conflict with the policy direction of their departments and their political masters.

It was interesting to see how they reacted when a difficult decision was required. They were often confused by opposing loyalties. It was a fascinating but uncomfortable year. I missed most of the members of the old Board who had departed. They were, at the end, loyal directors who understood at least their fiduciary duties if not the intricacies of business.

The new Board however inherited a royal mess, the result of ham-handedness and the inexperience of officials of the shareholder. One of these was found to be corrupt as a result of which a major sale was cancelled and the asset re-offered.

At that stage, Tienie van Vuuren retired and his position as CEO was taken by Kobus Breed, who had since inception been the Chief Financial Officer. He proved to be superb, and in joint harness with Joe Coetzer, who was promoted to CFO, oversaw the resurrection of the Group to record profitability, in spite of all of the ills that I have mentioned, and particularly Government interference. SAFCOL is very fortunate in these individuals and in their willingness to continue to serve it until its major problems are behind it.

Eventually, what I had expected in December 2001 happened in February of 2004. In the intervening period my relationship with Government officials had become increasingly strained. Either by design or work pressure, Minister Radebe had avoided meeting me for over a year. A new Director-General and Chief Director had been appointed with whom I found little rapport. There were constant attempts to erode SAFCOL's legitimate independence and to pressure it into accepting an offer for one of its regions that whilst politically and practically attractive, was not commercially acceptable to SAFCOL. I was requested to stand down as a director and was replaced as Chairman. The reasons given were "reconstruction of the Board, Government policy about long-serving

directors” etc., but the underlying reasons were very obvious. I made my views very clear to the Minister and to the Board, which was now even more tightly packed with Government officials, and departed.

It was a sad and abrupt end to ten years of largely successful effort, but in many ways a relief from increasing unease and unhappiness at the largely lip-service paid by Government to its publicly-stated desire for strict corporate governance. It was also very satisfying to leave behind a record profit and a very capable if chronically overworked top team.