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McBride's 'test case' of reconciliation

Magoo's Bar bombing has become a noose around his neck

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ROBERT McBride's plan was to blow up the Hyperama in West Street, Durban. He bought a powder-blue 1978 Ford Cortina from a used-car dealer and paid for it with ANC money.

He chose the Hyperama because it was central. He didn't want the effect of the explosion to be hidden. He wanted the large, glass-fronted building "flattened", but he didn't want casualties.

The 22-year-old McBride built the bomb himself, using explosives from an arms cache. He included 200 AK47 bullets and pieces of burglar-proofing iron for shrapnel.

On the night of June 14, 1986, he met fellow ANC operatives Matthew Lecordier and Greta Appelgren, his then girlfriend, all three part of an ANC cell run under the command of Aboobaker Ismail, out of Gaborone.

Just two days earlier, a State of Emergency had been announced, ratcheting up the pressure of an already oppressive apartheid state to unprecedented levels, as SADF troops began launching cross-border attacks.

McBride and Lecordier drove in the Cortina packed with explosives, and Appelgren followed them in her sister's Mazda 323. They headed for West Street. It was after 8pm when McBride parked the Cortina.

He was preparing to detonate the bomb when an argument broke out with Lecordier. McBride was told he was "wasting" the explosives.

Lecordier said the people wanted white destruction, but McBride insisted it was not the ANC's policy to attack white people.

Lecordier, who would turn State's witness under torture and testify against McBride, refused to accept this.

Instead, the Cortina was moved to Marine Parade, setting off a chain of events that continues to reverberate today, 24 years later, and explains why McBride will be in the Constitutional Court in September for a historic case, his final face-off with The Citizen newspaper, which has lost in two courts against the man they insist on calling a cold-blooded multiple murderer.

Appelgren parked the Mazda in front of the Parade Hotel, waiting for Lecordier and McBride, who was driving the Cortina. She moved the Mazda out of the parking bay when the Cortina arrived. McBride activated the bomb fuse, set for a maximum delay of 15 minutes.

It was just after 9.30pm when the men got out and walked to meet Appelgren not far away. Soon after they drove off, the massive bomb exploded. The scene at Magoo's, where cocktail hour had just ended, was one of absolute horror. Three young women - Angelique Patten-den, Julie van der Linde and Marchelle Gerrard - were killed. More than 70 were injured.

McBride would get the death sentence and spend years on Death Row at Pretoria Central before being reprieved as part of a large group identified by the ANC and the National Party for clemency in the early 1990s.

A free man, he nonetheless went to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2000 seeking amnesty. It was granted and along with amnesty came its critical protection written into law for the noble purpose of helping to heal a country so damaged.

Those who received it would have their conviction and sentence expunged.

Like so many on both sides of the political and racial divide who admitted to their crimes and expressed remorse, it is McBride's, right not to wear Magoo's as a noose for the rest of his life.

The same is true of Barend Strydom, the self-confessed racist who walked up to black people on Strijdom Square in Pretoria in 1988 and smiled at them before shooting them at point-blank range.

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He killed eight and injured more than two dozen, saying he regarded black people as nothing more than vermin.

In what was described as a trade-off, he and McBride walked free at the same time, having shared Death Row for years.

But The Citizen chose to ignore the law when it began a campaign against McBride, starting in 2003 with an editorial after the news that McBride had been tipped to become Ekurhuleni's metro police chief.

"McBride's candidacy for the (post) is indicative of the ANC's attitude to crime," it wrote.

"They can't be serious. He is blatantly unsuited, unless his backers support the dubious philosophy: set a criminal to catch a criminal.

"Make no mistake, that's what he is. The cold-blooded multiple murders which he committed in the Magoo's Bar bombing put him firmly in the category."

A week later, following this editorial, The Citizen's Martin Williams was invited to debate forgiveness on radio. He then referred to McBride's "track record as a multiple murderer" in another editorial.

So McBride's lawyers wrote to the paper, saying it had defamed him.

A week later, then-president Thabo Mbeki criticised The Citizen in his weekly online letter, saying the newspaper had been "fundamentally wrong", that it had undermined the work of the TRC.

The newspaper then criticised Mbeki, saying it thought he "would have more important things to do than endorse bomber McBride's right to become ... police chief".

"In his usual circuitous, obfuscatory language, Mbeki hints darkly at 'the grave implications of what The Citizen is trying to achieve'.

"He then wanders off down a side road of his own making, about attitudes to the TRC and 'the path of national reconciliation'. Rubbish."

Unfortunately for The Citizen, neither the High Court nor the Supreme Court of Appeal agreed that a bill designed to bring about unity "based on the principle that reconciliation depends on forgiveness" was "rubbish".

Both found for McBride, awarding him costs. But the newspaper would not back down.

So when all parties attend the Concourt later this year, it will be to hear a historic judgment which has critical implications for our country as we still battle to find that very reconciliation.

And at the core of the court's decision may be a very difficult truth: that many, if not most, white South Africans do not properly understand the past. Many refuse to even try.

This week, McBride said he looked forward to meeting his adversaries at the Concourt.

"In a funny way, this is, almost by default, the test case of whether this reconciliation can work. I never asked for any special privileges. I never asked to be handled differently at all.

"When I embarked on Struggle, I knew what it meant for me.

"I haven't changed in my belief that we are establishing a new country. That was always the deal.

"That was why the TRC was so important. There was no purpose for me to go to the TRC in the sense I was already out of jail, but my organisation agreed it was part of reconciliation, part of nation-building. So we went.

"The Citizen and other newspapers had a field day. It was like the retrial of Robert McBride. But for me, there is a clear issue.

"Take the Witbank car bomb of 1988, also perpetrated by MK. Three people died. But nobody knows the name of even one of them. Who were the cadres? Ask anyone. They wouldn't know.

"People want to be selective in their morality. But I say, it's a free country. I don't have a problem with that."

And this surely reaches into the heart of the matter. Those who died in Witbank were all black. And although it would probably stand its ground on this point, there is a view that The Citizen has gone after McBride simply because his bomb killed only white people.

Yet in the newspaper's bid, apparently to prevent history from being erased, much of McBride's own history continues to be erased.

His vilification has happened largely without context.

And even many who take issue with McBride for more recent, sensational trials and tribulations have no question that, of all the ANC's soldiers, he has never been allowed to move on while others' atrocities on both sides have long been forgiven and forgotten.

Although it has become part of the anti-McBride lore, McBride did not act alone.

The ANC took full responsibility for the Magoo's bombing. Yet, even in this, the ANC's own rationale has been washed over.

The bombing was in line with a hard-won policy decision taken at the ANC's Kabwe conference a year before Magoo's.

The distinction between soft and hard targets had been abolished in the course of MK military operations and the intention was to focus the attention of white people on the liberation struggle with the hope they too would pressurise their government and isolate it.

It is also true that the trial court, led by Judge J Shearer, was not unanimous in its judgment of McBride.

Dissenting assessor Professor JRL Milton, for instance, found that "significant factors" had a bearing on McBride, including his personal and political deprivation, his young age and the stress of his intense emotions at a time of great violence by the State.

On sentencing McBride to death, Judge Shearer said he did so with great sadness.

At the Supreme Court of Appeal, Judge Michael Corbett was equally clear. He told the court about the ghetto of Wentworth where McBride had grown up, describing how it was founded when the authorities moved coloured people made homeless by the Group Areas Act into an old military barracks.

"Housing and educational facilities were poor. Unemployment was high. Alcoholism, gangsterism and crime generally were rampant. (McBride's) parents moved their home 12 times in their first four years of marriage before they were allocated a house.

"McBride had many clashes with gangsters. He was twice stabbed and on one occasion shot and killed a gangster in self-defence."

The TRC hearings into the Magoo's Bar bombings were highly emotional.

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Sharon Welgemoed, a sister of Marchelle Gerrard who died at Magoo's, said: "My family and I know and realise Mr McBride has had his day in court and served only six years before being indemnified.

"However, how do we equate those relatively few years to a life-

time without Marchelle?"

But her testimony and that of others showed that the grieving families' understanding of events - and history - was sparse. She thought, for example, that McBride was applying for amnesty so that he could not be sued in a civil court.

Some members of the families said the "Yes" vote in the Referendum of 1983 was proof that not all white people were racist. But it had to be pointed out to them that all that it did was usher in a racist tricameral Parliament.

Relatives of the victims also argued that the ANC "could have negotiated" instead of bombed. It had to be pointed out that the ANC had done this in vain for 50 years before being outlawed.

All white, they admitted they did not know that.

Judge Pillay had to explain to them: "Those people who were responsible for the upkeep of apartheid shielded themselves amongst civilians, and because there was a fight against apartheid and all those who upheld it, there were bound to be civilian casualties".

Welgemoed, in particular, said "in hindsight" she accepted this.

She said she "abhorred" the fact that the SADF had gone into Gaborone and staged raids in which innocent people, including children, were killed.

"I would like to point out... as a matter of record that the very first time that I heard of such terrible atrocities taking place was at the very first TRC hearings," she said.

"I heard about what Security Branch people actually did and I was horrified, I cried for those people and I felt sick to my stomach to hear what had taken place.

"I never realised that such disgusting, despicable acts ever took place in this country of ours."

In the end, Welgemoed said: "I want this to be the end for me. I don't want to read about it in the papers again, I don't want to hear any more about it again, I want it to end.

"I want the past to be put in the past where it belongs.

And Judge Pillay spoke kindly, saying: "It's my personal opinion that this area of the country needs more healing than the rest and I detect a bit of bitterness in you and I think it's understandable..."

"I'm not asking you to forget your sister, but in order to facilitate what you yourself say this country needs, is it at all possible that you could consider forgiving those who caused the heartbreak?"

"It's important to this country, not only yours, everybody else who have been hurt by the history of this country."

During his trial, McBride expressed remorse. In his petition for clemency, he renounced the use of violence as a means of resolving political questions.

He said he would, if ever given a second chance, never again commit another violent action.

The Concourt may finally allow everyone to be at peace.