SA Media - The University of the Free State

Page: 1

Source: STAR

Date: 14-Jun-2011

Topic: 15

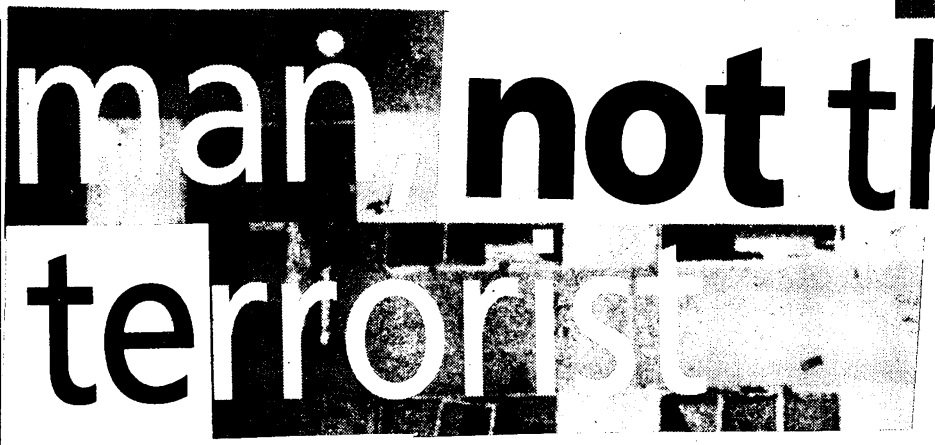
Ref No: 6101

1

ID: 03957009-01 | Source Page: 11

INSIDE

McBride the man not the terrorist



He expressed his remorse. He renounced violence. Yet the Magoo's bombing remains a noose around his neck, writes ***Janet Smith***

ROBERT McBride is a big, strong man, at least 1.93m. He's 50 this year, but looks 10 years younger. His hair is greying slightly, but his face is quite unmarked. Yet all around him is the tension of disenchantment.

Robert McBride, 25 years after the Magoo's Bar bombing, is so much a construct of others that in person, he is quite moving for his actual understatement.

There are pointers to the man he is. He seems to spend a lot of time with his six-year-old daughter, who he affectionately calls "Nanna". She is softly spoken, well-behaved, smiles all the time and warms easily to her father's tender hugs and kisses. They walk harmoniously, hand in hand, but he won't allow her to be photographed. His family, he has always said, are out of bounds.

McBride is uncomfortable with pictures of himself, too. It's difficult to say why. He's blunt, but there's no machismo. There's an almost worrying shortage of edge.

He's accessible. He's honest. He doesn't smile much, but he's not unfriendly. It is difficult to equate McBride with any suggestions of impropriety. He doesn't even smoke.

Everything you would read about him from 25 years ago suggests he is more or less the same man he was at 21, when he parked that blue Cortina outside Magoo's and set a timer that would blow the bar at the corner of Serridge and Marine Parade apart just after 9pm.

"Same values," he agrees. "Same effective values about life. I never make promises I can't keep if I am unable to carry them out. If I can't commit, I won't do it. When I commit, I commit. I would never want someone to say, you promised me this and you didn't deliver."

Twenty-five years after the bombing, there is so much that doesn't make sense. Of every atrocity committed by the apartheid government against black South Africans, and of every retaliatory act by the liberation movements, it still seems as if Magoo's is the one that cannot be forgotten or forgiven.

McBride is at the centre of that cumulative sense of dread.

He sits quietly, and turns to the side to watch his daughter playing happily on the carpet next to us.

He pushes his glasses up, and takes a moment to answer. He asks the question himself, and it seems as if it will always be: "Why?"

There are critical misunderstandings. McBride did not act alone. He had the authority of the ANC. As young as he was, his was a perfect record of insurgence at the time of Magoo's. Together with Gordon Webster, he ran a section of the Special Operations Unit that was commandeered from Gabarone by Aboobaker Ismail. Ismail reported to Joe Slovo. Slovo reported to ANC president OR Tambo. It was a tight, disciplined trajectory.

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 South Africans on the liberation Struggle with the hope that they would pressurise the apartheid government and help isolate it.

Yet McBride took the blame for the entire event. That has, unfortunately, made it easier to fracture the truth.

"It is amazing that seven people applied for amnesty from the TRC for the incident. But the only interest has been in me. The question is: why? That's the one issue. The other issue is that it is not society, not reactionary whites hounding me, but newspapers, including your newspaper. Every time I am considered for a job, it's a headline in your newspaper. I'm the focus.

"That was not the first time the ANC had used car bombs and it was not the last time.

"Another thing I would like to correct is that this was not a purely civilian target. I've taken the time to get the extracts from the only victim who could have known who was there that night – the barmaid, Helen Kearney."

McBride hands over the TRC transcript from October 12, 1999. It was Day 11 of the amnesty hearings, and Kearney took the stand. All the sections that apply have been highlighted with a green marker. He hopes it will add some clarification.

Kearney lived in the Parade Hotel where she also worked. She spent seven years behind the bar at the Why Not and Magoo's and was also a manager of the hotel. If anyone knew the patrons, says McBride, it would have been Kearney.

At the time of the bomb, Magoo's had been running for about five years. Kearney described it to the TRC as "a very heavy live band action bar... the in-place".

But it was mostly regulars who showed up "practically every day and every weekend".

Under examination, Kearney said security policemen, servicemen and cops "did attend regularly".

Already a free man, McBride went to the 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 damaged country. Those who received it would have their conviction and sentence expunged.

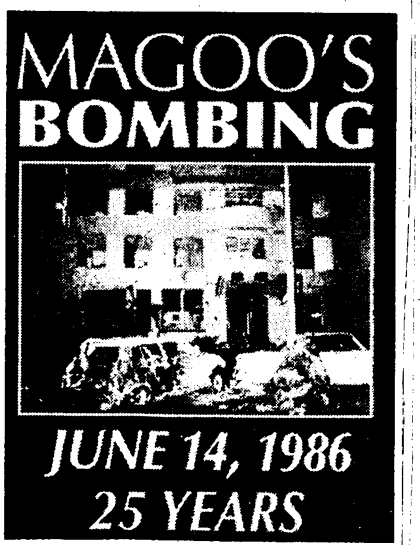
Like so many on both sides of the political and racial divide who admitted to their crimes and expressed remorse, it was McBride's right not to wear Magoo's as a noose for the rest of his life.

But that was complicated by the Constitutional Court judgment earlier this year that said he could be called a murderer.

That almost stopped McBride dead. He feels the court "made a moral equivalent between the actions of the apartheid government and the actions of freedom fighters, which is like saying the Jews in the ghettoes of Poland were on the same level as the Nazis sending people to the gas chambers, or French Resistance fighters being at the same level as Nazis killing gays and Jews. It's just not the same".

The Concourt judgment came at the end of The Citizen's campaign against McBride that began in 2003 with an editorial after the news that he had been tipped to become Ekurhuleni's metro police chief.

It said he was "blatantly unsuited" because of "the cold-blooded multiple murders which he committed in the Magoo's Bar bombing". Another editorial would



refer to McBride's "track record as a multiple murderer".

He believed the newspaper had defamed him, and a high court and the Supreme Court of Appeal agreed, awarding him costs. But the newspaper would not back down. McBride called it his "retrial".

"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."

Many believe that that is what reached into the heart of the matter.

Those who died in Witbank were all black. There was a view that The Citizen went after McBride simply because his bomb killed only white people.

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.

Relatives of the victims argued at the time 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. The families admitted they did not know that.

There are other hurts for McBride, although he doesn't call them that. He says when he was on death row, he and another comrade, Sibusiso Mantolo Masuga, were "pivotal in exposing apartheid hit squads, including Vlakplaas and including the murder of Griffiths Mxenge, yet the family of Griffiths Mxenge joined the apartheid-created Citizen against me".

He says Sibanyoni Mabuza, whose son was also killed by the "old government", and who also joined the Concourt bid as amici with The Citizen, sent him a message after the judgment saying she was sorry, and asking "how she could fix it up".

"I said, it's too late. It's done."

It concerns him that, in its judgment, the court said "they cannot go on forever and a day calling me a murderer. The issue is while they were so bold with other issues, they did not say when it would stop."

So he can only hold on to his view that, "in any event, constitutional law is still being developed and there will be other cases to deal with this when these are long gone. Nobody calls those who led the Warsaw uprisings 'murderers'.

"The point I am making is that I have no problem with anybody. The love and support I get from the majority of people is overwhelming and that's what keeps me strong."

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 clearly said he would never again commit another violent action.

McBride spent six years on death row at Pretoria Central Prison before his sentence was commuted to life. In what was described as a trade-off between the National Party and the ANC, racist killer Barend Strydom and McBride walked free at the same time, having long shared the prospect of the executioner.

Strydom strolled up to eight black people on Strijdom Square in Pretoria and shot them dead at point-blank range. He wounded several more, and has never expressed regret. He was not acting on behalf of any organisation. His only position, then and now, is that black people are not people, but vermin.

While responses to McBride are deep and sometimes primitive, no one mentions Strydom anymore.

"It would have been worse if we didn't win," he says. "So I carry that sacrifice. We won," McBride pats his shoulder. "I'll carry that cross."

When he walks in Durban today, as he has for years, he is unafraid. "My life is unaffected by any loudmouths who come up to me and challenge me.

"I have absolutely no fear. I've made my sacrifice. Today, there is nobody who will tell me they supported apartheid. In spite of everything, in my daily life I keep promoting reconciliation, no matter what attempts are made to make me feel small.

"I have the same vision as I did when I joined MK."

These days, McBride works mostly in risk management consulting. But he's also doing peace work that he feels contains his contradictions in the way it always has.

He says he was invited by top South African lawyer Brian Currin, a key figure in the establishment of the TRC, to participate in an international group of mediators trying to find a negotiated solution for the conflict in the Basque country between the separatist paramilitary ETA and the Spanish and French governments.

"This kind of thing has always been a part of my life.

"When I was released, I was first deployed on the East Rand to stop the surrogates of apartheid. That was between ourselves and Inkatha.

"I worked on the East Timor issue when everybody was against me because the Indonesians were giving us money.

"I was involved in the Northern Ireland peace process.

"I really believe peace and justice can coincide and coexist, so I like to do this.

"That's my life."

In the complex tangle of factions and interests within the ANC today, with its alliances, betrayals and exultations, McBride handles his support deftly. He is certainly the party's best-known soldier, next to Chris Hani.

"I never turned my back on the movement. What I am is what the ANC engendered in me. I've always been surrounded by good people. Good commanders.

"Even when I begin to feel cynical, I know they are there. A bond, a connection like that can never be broken. All the people who worked with me, I've always held them in high esteem. They'll always have a special place in my heart.

"Just like some people have tried over the years in a way to separate Nelson Mandela from the ANC, they've tried to separate me from the ANC. But nobody can belittle our Struggle and our sacrifices and reduce our revolution."