

## The Emperor is Naked

'The Emperor's New Clothes' is one of the most enduring tales by Hans Christian Andersen. It tells the story of a fashion-obsessed Emperor who has no time to govern his country, care for his people and show leadership.

With a coat to show off "for every hour of the day", he spends all his time and money on clothes.

One day two swindlers come into town posing as master weavers. They claim to make clothes out of the most fabulous fabric. The clothes made from this fabric became invisible to anyone "unfit to hold office" or who is "unpardonably stupid".

Such clothes, the Emperor reasoned, should enable him to discover not only those in his service unfit for office, but how to distinguish the clever from the stupid.

Without hesitation, the Emperor advances huge sums of money for this wonderful "fabric" to be manufactured.

Soon, through astute marketing, the weavers ensure everyone in the city knows of their wondrous creation. The entire population is curious to see who among them will be found unfit for office and stupid, no gal!

It isn't long before the Emperor wants to satisfy his own curiosity. He starts out cautiously. Despite feeling pretty sure of himself as clever enough and fit for office, he sends an old and supposedly honest minister to check things out first.

The minister finds the swindlers busy "at work". But where are the looms? Where is the cloth? Yet curiously, the swindlers' hands are "weaving" furiously.

"Look at this wonderful work!" the swindlers tell the minister. Bewildered, the minister decides he cannot risk being thought unfit for office and stupid.

"Extraordinary!" he exclaims, nodding in praise.

When the swindlers ask for more money, it comes.

After a second minister vouches to the Emperor for the fabric and designs of miraculous quality, the Emperor feels confident it is time for him to go see the fabric himself "while it is still on the loom". He takes along his two ministers and a company of other courtiers to see the precious cloth that is now the talk of the city.

This time the swindlers do not have to do any marketing; the two enthusiastic ministers did it all: "Is this not magnificent? Your Majesty must admire the astonishing colours and patterns!"

Despite the evidence before his eyes, the Emperor, who does not want to be thought of as stupid and unfit for office, tells the swindlers: "Your cloth has the most gracious approval!"

Indeed! Everyone present emphatically agrees.

The Emperor immediately appoints the swindlers as "imperial court weavers". They are now to begin to make the Emperor's new clothes.

Soon the clothes are ready and the day is announced on which the Emperor will stride out into the city to show off his new clothes to his people.

Both swindlers assist him, while mouthing the most flattering compliments, as the Emperor takes off his old clothes. They then "dress him" in his new outfit.

"A magnificent suit of clothes!" everyone present approves, confirming what the Emperor is apparently seeing in his reflection in the mirror. Who among them would risk others knowing they did not see anything other than a naked man?

But as the Emperor struts out in public, only a child sees the reality: "The Emperor is naked!"

In a most uncanny manner, Hans Christian Andersen was recently reincarnated in South Africa. He was reborn in the form of Brett Murray, who painted an image of a South African Emperor. A carnival of outrage

ensued with many citizens, including some of the most prominent, making every effort not to be seen as unfit for office and as idiots, no gal.

To crown it all, not in his wildest dreams would the 19th-century Danish storyteller have guessed when he died that in his reincarnation he would be declared a racist in South Africa. Somewhat bemused, he must console himself that the habit humans have of denying the testimony of their eyes is indeed a universal phenomenon.

The public space in South Africa recently displayed vividly the kinds of diversion and obfuscation that Andersen contemplated so well in his timeless story.

Said President Jacob Zuma, reminding us that he was speaking on the anniversary of the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910: "In those days," he quoted Selope Thema, "the black man . . . was not allowed to travel first, second or third class on the trains. He travelled in trucks almost similar to those used for cattle and horses . . ."

The president forgot to update Selope Thema: "Today," he should have added, "the 'black man' can travel to New York in three trans-continental jets on the same visit."

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Said Gwede Mantashe, declaring the streets as the site of validation of public sentiment: "What the ANC cannot win in the courts, it will win in the streets."

But the Emperor is naked! He is naked in the streets; he is naked in the courts. He is naked!

Said Blade Nzimande, galvanising Lenin's masses: "It is our democratic right not to read City Press. Let us use this weekend to call on all our shop stewards' councils, our churches, our branch meetings, our stokvels, our calls to radio stations to say human dignity, especially black dignity, must be respected in this country."

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Said Jackson Mthembu: "Please apologise to the people of South Africa,

the ANC and everybody . . . This pain has been so deep-seated.”  
But the Emperor is naked!

Said David Makhura: “I would defend anyone who was insulted in the name of art.”

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Said the Cabinet: “This depiction also showed disrespect for the office of the president and the culture that he shares with millions of people.”

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Said Mathole Motshekga: (Mosiuo) Lekota treats Parliament like a shebeen.

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Said the Film and Publication Board (FPB) in a submissive preamble to their classification report: “We mark child protection week this week and as the FPB we are closely linked to government’s programme of promoting the safety of children under the theme ‘working together for protection of children’.

Child protection is at the heart of our mandate and we exercise our duties with interests and needs of children in mind.

A classification of ‘16N’ has been decided upon by the classification committee for the artwork by Brett Murray titled ‘The Spear’ in its uncensored form.”

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In the foreground to all the public statements and engineered drama he started in his bid to secure public sympathy as victim of a racist attack, President Zuma conducted himself “normally”.

There he was on television among school children with one on his lap; there he was among the aged, bearing gifts to cheer their hearts; there he was announcing that Nkandla was on its way to being a city; and there he was turning the tap to “deliver” water to a woman in Hammanskraal who had written to him in desperation. The president was taking care of

his people.

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Exactly what did I feel when I first saw The Spear (Umkhonto) in The Times on Friday, May 18?

I was jolted, but definitely not offended. I dug deep into myself to find out why I had this mixture of feelings. This got me looking at other artworks by Brett Murray on exhibition with The Spear.

I saw the broader context and understood why I was not offended.

My capacity to be offended had been eroded cumulatively and decisively by Zuma's conduct before he became president of the ANC and president of South Africa, and ever since.

Numbed by disbelief at a string of disconcerting episodes, I found myself struggling to turn numbness into outrage. Hail to the Thief II, Murray's exhibition, I had to admit, expressed my outrage.

What kind of president of a country is not ashamed to be known to have brought political pressure to bear on his police services to have serious charges of murder and fraud dropped against an individual who does not inspire public confidence, so that this person can be reinstated as the head of crime intelligence?

Such conduct by the president is neither professionally nor morally justifiable. It does not "promote the unity of the nation which will advance the republic," as the Constitution enjoins.

Prior to this, the president did nothing to reassure an anxious public when John Block, chairman of the ANC in the Northern Cape and its MEC for finance, was arrested and charged with tender fraud. Hazel Jenkins, the province's premier, even stood in firm support of Block.

President Zuma comes across as being highly tolerant of criminality. In the context that criminal charges against him were unsatisfactorily withdrawn, his conduct in this respect should not be surprising.

ANC party members caught on the wrong side of the law are likely to

receive active support or admonitory leniency. This presents an image of the president as not being committed to upholding, defending and respecting "the Constitution as the supreme law of the republic".

Recently in Parliament, Zuma also declared that there was nothing wrong with politicians doing business with government. This implies he can be deemed to be permitting himself to do business with a government of which he is the head.

President Zuma doesn't seem to have a clue about the fundamental conflict of interest.

Chancellor House is the most prominent, most visible and most disconcerting symbol of this.

Is it any wonder then that tender fraud has spread like a contagion across the country? The president of the republic has accorded it parliamentary tolerance.

The import of all this permits one to ask: just how far has South Africa gone down the path towards becoming a full-blown gangster state?

What about the spate of senior public appointments made, only to be challenged successfully before the courts? What about attacks, some by ministers and senior ANC party officials, on the courts and the Constitution?

What about threats to the sovereignty of the republic as a result of highly suspect, undeclared favours granted to either the governing party or, by extension, the government, by powerful foreign interests?

How much of our country has been given away in this manner? How much of our national dignity, respect and prestige have been lost as a result? Who is running the country right now? Is it the ANC?

Or is it Cosatu or the SACP, neither of which has been voted into office?

Or has the "Tripartite Alliance" become the means by which they can exercise power after having avoided the rigours of winning an electoral mandate?

Are these organisations just two among many other interests, invisible-cloth swindlers who exert a powerful influence on the president and his party? Can they be deemed to have achieved the status of de facto control?

Are we in the throes of a benign coup d'état? Has the ANC become an empty shell, traded on the stock market of tenderpreneurship? Hail to the thief!

These questions should send a chilling message to all South Africans that it is time to begin to take their country back. The cumulative effect of it all is strongly suggestive to me: President Zuma seems eminently impeachable.

But a probable impeachment is not the point of this reflection. The point is to amplify why I was jolted by the courageous sensibility that composed *The Spear* and yet was not at all offended by it.

It was to point out the history of the corrosion or erosion of presidential dignity and respect as a result of consistent, even predictable, and questionable presidential conduct.

*The Spear* did not cause the disrespect and the loss of dignity; it simply reflected it. The Emperor is naked!

I watched with admiration as Zuma announced the removal from office of National Police Commissioner Bheki Cele. It seemed just right – until I remembered the Emperor.

The question was inescapable: would President Zuma survive the same investigative processes that led to the downfall of Cele?

What if the president put himself up for a Public Protector investigation? After all, he has nothing to fear. It would be far more healing than the announced conference on social cohesion.

The Emperor could stride into the streets wearing the most beautiful clothes ever, fully visible to the eyes of proud South Africans.