

Robert McBride: Caught in the jaws of State Capture, adrift in the present while captive of the past

By Marianne Thamm • 11 March 2019



It was the ruthless and violent application of unjust laws by the apartheid state on the black majority that drove Robert McBride into the arms of the underground structures of the ANC. It is now the shameless disregard of the law by an ANC led by Jacob Zuma – until recently - that has driven the former IPID head to lead one flank of the onslaught of the bitter dismantling of Zuma’s sprawling State Capture political project. The party McBride killed and was sentenced to death for has turned against him. Why?

In 1987, Fatima Meer, ANC stalwart, friend of Nelson Mandela, academic, author and activist, penned “A sociological report for the defence”, setting out the extenuating circumstances in the life of Robert McBride, who had, on 13 April that year, been sentenced to death three times by Justice Shearer in the Supreme Court of Natal.

The majority decision of the court had found “no extenuating circumstances”, while Professor John Milton’s minority judgment had.

McBride spent five years on death row after the sentence had been upheld by the SCA. He was reprieved on 21 April 1991 and released in 1992. McBride faced his first inquiry at the TRC in 1997, represented by human rights lawyer [Brian Currin](#).

And then, one of those ironies history throws into the mix.

In September 2018 Currin testified at the Zondo Commission of Inquiry into State Capture that he was one of the first in a tight link of whistle-blowers who had first obtained the #GuptaLeaks – a tipping point in the State Capture project.

Over 30 years later, two men, from opposite ends of the globe, and who have had little to do with each other since, would find themselves key to the undoing of the Zuma years not only to the country, but the ANC itself.

In 1986, however, on the night of 14 June, three young women, Julie van der Linde, Angelique Pattenden and Marchelle Gerand, were killed instantly when a car packed with explosives was

detonated on Durban's Marine Parade near two bars, Why Not? and Magoo's. At least 70 people were severely injured.

"Robert McBride did not wish them dead, not particularly them," wrote Meer in 1987.

McBride had been part of an ANC underground MK cell that had carried out 23 known combat missions during the first half of 1986. These, Meer noted, included "eight acts of sabotage against installations, the rescuing of a comrade shot and detained by the police in a hospital, and the blasting of a car bomb".



Young Robert McBride (Photo from Apartheid Museum collection)

McBride has, until today, never revealed who in the ANC had given him the command to make and place the car bomb near the bars.

Over the years a narrative developed, among some, of McBride as a ruthless "terrorist", a man who somehow remained unforgiven while white South Africa expected forgiveness from the black majority for crimes committed by the apartheid state on behalf of this minority.

In 2011, [AfriForum](#) paid tribute to the victims and the injured but not without inserting their own political agenda.

"We don't approve of the history of young Afrikaners being criminalised, while the history of the ANC is romanticised," said Charl Oberholzer, National Chairperson of AfriForum Youth.

In an extraordinary piece, written in 2015, Robyn Leslie and Debora Matthews for the South African History Archive, and published in [Daily Maverick](#), detail truths that emerged in McBride and his co-accused Greta Apelgren's Section 29 TRC hearings, and which were less commonly known.

This included the plans for the action, McBride's involvement, as well as the psychological effect of the event on the perpetrators, particularly McBride, in the aftermath.

Leslie and Matthews wrote:

"The instruction to create and suitably place a car bomb, it turns out, was actually Gordon Webster's task, who then asked McBride to find an appropriate target. Such a target choice, countering the information provided in 1986 – that he simply woke up one morning to make a bomb – had involved intelligence-gathering and personal verification of whether the choice of location fitted the ANC's mandate. The ANC's directive was clear, as McBride stated in his inquiry."

The authors set out how, contrary to court records of the 1980s, "discussion about the location of the car bomb was fraught and by no means unconsidered. McBride explains how he raised his concerns about the target with his commander".

"[The target selection] was a place where there was a concentration of security personnel, but where there could be injury or death to people who were not direct targets... this is the issue I raised with my commander," McBride explained in his hearing.

McBride's car bomb ended people's lives, and altered his own irrevocably. Greta Apelgren, while they were still in hiding together before their 1986 arrest and torture, remembers how Robert seemed to be slowly falling to pieces.

"I couldn't talk to him much. He used to cry a great deal. He was depressed a lot."

She describes how he used to rise early in the day and weep.

"His whole body would be bent over and crying, sob so badly... he was damaged after that," wrote Leslie and Matthews.

Meer's 60-page 1987 report on McBride provided a detailed account not only of McBride and Apelgren's lives growing up in the "coloured" township of Wentworth, but the effect of apartheid on the black majority with regard to every aspect of existence in South Africa at the time.

McBride's first encounter with police, Meer wrote, occurred at the age of three when his father, Derrick McBride, who had struggled to establish a business and had resorted to alcohol, took his young son on a police night raid.

McBride's father's drinking partner was a policeman who had invited the older McBride to accompany him on these raids of Wentworth.

Wrote Meer:

"Flouting the protests of his wife, the toddler Robert was dragged to these nocturnal hunts. It left him with a bad image of both the police and his father."

McBride Jr, she added, began to view the police “not as preservers of law and order in Wentworth, but as preyers and exploiters”.

When he was eight, a policeman stopped next to the young McBride and stole his bicycle on the pretext of confiscating it as he had been riding “on the wrong side of the road”.

“His uncle, also a police sergeant, came to his rescue and, seeing the policeman about to load the bicycle in his car, accused the policeman of taking it for his own son,” Meer recounts.

Then when McBride was 13 he had been beaten on the knuckles in the local charge office as punishment for shouting that they should stop hitting another young man who had also been apprehended.

“His attitude to the police could not have been significantly influenced by his father’s own experiences of them. The police were no different from criminals in his father’s mind and the boy [McBride] took over that evaluation,” said Meer.

More recently, during his tenure as IPID head since 2014, McBride has found deep rot in the law enforcement cluster. So much so that it threatens the security and the sovereignty of the South African state.

It has spread everywhere, from the head to the tail. It involves a network of corrupt politicians, top ranking SAPS and Hawks members, members of the NPA, CI, the judiciary, business, as well as the financial and consultancy sector.

So here is McBride, the Wentworth boy who experienced the police as a malevolent force.

As a man, McBride is once again confronted with another iteration of the same. Only this time it is the party he killed for and that, in 2019, goes by the same name, the same colours, the same mass rallies, the same songs, the same rituals.

Only now, it preys mindlessly on its apparently free citizens, hoovering up eye-watering sums of public funds to fuel lethal factional battles and lifestyles needing extraordinary wealth to sustain. Then there are the blue lights, the entourages, the red carpets, the handshakes, the smiles, the whispers, the power.

The casualties, of course, are ANC members – murdered and assassinated.

And, of course, the citizens of South Africa. A sick ANC is a sick South Africa. McBride knows this.

And while many of us may be caught in the headlights, frozen by the extent of the corruption that has been uncovered, McBride wades in.

By all, and any means, necessary.

Fast-forward to [February 2019](#). Parliament’s Committee on Police is meeting to “debate” the decision by the Minister of Police, Bheki Cele, not to renew McBride’s five-year contract.

The IPID head has, by this time, survived a few attempts to remove him from his post illegally. Former Police Minister Nathi Nhleko lost his bid to get rid of McBride. Now it is Cele’s turn.

The Constitutional Court has ruled that the IPID Act renders the body independent of political interference, through the Minister. Whether McBride or someone else will be the new head is not up to Cele. It is up to the committee.

But instead of focusing on the lawful procedure of appointment and non-renewal, ANC members, every single one in the committee, came out in formation and turned on McBride.

McBride was effectively accused of lying, the ANC's Leonard Ramatlakane even suggesting McBride's uncovering of an alleged attempt by Crime Intelligence to procure a "grabber" at the inflated price of R45-million just before the ANC's elective conference at Nasrec in December 2017 was a "red herring".

It is a statement that cannot even be mildly entertained as there is no way Ramatlakane could know this, as Cele and SAPS National Commissioner Khehla Sitole have consistently refused to "declassify" documents pertaining to the grabber procurement.

The Minister and the National Commissioner have cited "national security" as the reason. The Inspector-General of Intelligence, Setlhomamaru Dintwe has, however, recommended they be declassified as it appeared the classification was an attempt at covering up criminal behaviour.

To quote Marx. Not Karl, Groucho.

"Who are you going to believe, me, or your eyes [or ears in this instance]."

McBride, with all his scars, seen and unseen – those from excruciating physical torture after he was captured by apartheid police, to the mental torture of five years on death row, and the psychological torture of having taken human lives – represents the best of a cadreship in the ANC which survived the end of apartheid.

Theirs was no revolution, however; it was a negotiated settlement, a war partially won.

It is a war that continues today, albeit in another shape and form. This time it is part of a global network of powerful business and political elites, who are making a mockery of democracy and the meaning of a vote.

Many in South African fought for and died for ideals that are today, through the Freedom Charter, enshrined in the Constitution.

Back in 1987 Meer concluded:

"A careful review of Robert's life and personality establishes that he is no killer, that to take a life is quite contrary to his nature. His parents describe him as a quiet, introverted boy, content to keep his own company, and rarely having more than one friend at a time. But at the same time he was intensely sensitive to the pain of others and felt compelled to do something about that pain."

And then:

"Robert McBride has been more sinned against than a sinner and that is his fundamental extenuation. But the South African court, an organ of the State, can hardly be expected to concede the reality of structured violence, for to do so is to condemn the State itself."

Whatever his future, Robert McBride has made his mark on South African history. At present he has not yet given up the fight. The committee has decided McBride will not be reappointed. McBride and others are challenging this in court.

And then there is the Zondo Commission, McBride's last stop on the way out. What legacy will he leave? DM

Reference:

Thamm, M. (2019). [Robert McBride: Caught in the jaws of State Capture, adrift in the present while captive of the past](https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-03-11-robert-mcbride-caught-in-the-jaws-of-state-capture-adrift-in-the-present-while-captive-of-the-past/) from *Daily Maverick*, 11 March 2019, online. Available at <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2019-03-11-robert-mcbride-caught-in-the-jaws-of-state-capture-adrift-in-the-present-while-captive-of-the-past/> . Accessed on 12 March 2019.