

# **I Don't Like Cricket, I Hate It! How the Minister's Imbizo resurrected suppressed childhood memories and hurled me into the horrors of the present**

This text was published online by ASAI in 2006 [\[LINK\]](#)

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After five years at the local, whites-only government school I was sent to a private, then boys-only, Catholic boarding school. Sending your children to be educated by strangers with a penchant for corporal punishment was entirely consistent with the child-rearing ethics of the post-slavery/ colonial plantation class. Where the school stood apart was that it was more liberal than most – it was modelled on Thomas More, the English chancellor who chose to lose his head rather than his principles, and the school adopted his motto of “truth conquers all”. In 1977, I attended my first ever political meeting, called by the Black Sash to protest against deaths in detention, dressed in my Sunday Best. One prize-giving ceremony a few years earlier we were treated to the Chief Minister of KwaZulu, Mangosuthu Buthe, who arrived with a fleet of black Mercedes’ with number plates one to six.

If anything was more boring than Buthe’s speech, it had to be long days spent dressed in white enacting that colonial gift to the colonies: cricket. One of the consequences of being in a small school was that if they threw you the ball and you caught it you were in the first team. This usually meant playing against big schools that had many teams, and for whom sport was dead serious, schools more likely to have mottos such as “We shall conquer”. Bearing in mind that we were also not entirely encouraged to be competitive – the headmaster would always make a point in assembly of congratulating all participants, and lost his job after parents with perceived sports prodigies for children ganged up against him – chances were we would get thrashed. As one of the smallest boys in my age group I inevitably found myself struggling with oversized bat, knee pads and crotch-guard.

Somehow I acquired some dubious merits as a cricketer. One of these qualities was that I learned to defend myself from overzealous bowlers. Meaning that on a good day I could block the ball, no matter what angle it came from or regardless of where it was headed. All I cared was that it didn’t hit me. I don’t think I ever hit the ball to the boundary, not even in a practice match. The value of this was that if there was no way we could reach the opposition’s total, which there usually wasn’t, then we could still draw with them if they failed to get us out. Another dubious asset of mine was that I had a very boring, medium paced style of bowling, remarkable only in that it was occasionally subjected to criticism that I was throwing. Where my bowling was useful was that I was accurate, seldom pitched two consecutive balls in the same place, and had a faint off-spin. Since most coaches trained their boys to only whack

balls that were off target I would frustrate the hell out of hungry batsmen. They would be obliged to block, block, and block, very useful when you need to reduce the run rate of the opposition. In retrospect, it seems that my value as a reluctant cricketer was in wasting time. Which brings me, finally, to Minister Pallo Jordan's Imbizo. [1]

Let me say at the outset that I don't think the Minister is as dull as my cricket. Nor does the elegant Minister resemble the unsightly gait of an ill-fitted, pale faced youth squinting in the sun. But he really took me back to those years frying slowly in the heat waiting for the whole trying ordeal to be done. It is hard to retain faith in the charade of consultation when the Minister says he is there to listen, and then talks, and talks while you watch the time, your time apparently, whittling away. Now if one was listening to an insightful analysis of the challenges facing the visual arts, I, for one, would not complain. But when you find yourself being subjected to one superfluous example after another, then you cannot help but wonder whether the Minister is really there to bat or to field. For example in advising us what questions were not appropriate he told us not to ask to go to the moon. Then he proceeded to give us reasons (note plural) why he can't send us to the moon. I do believe the same entirely inappropriate example was used at the last Cape Town Imbizo. Or when a series of questions about what the Minister and his Department are doing for the visual arts is answered with a copious list of examples from the performing arts, or literature, or film, or language... then one begins to wonder if the Minister is testing the field to see if we are still awake.

Several people expressed to me the opinion that the Minister came over as a typical politician, the sort that does not answer your questions. The one time he enquired if the question had been answered he received a polite, one word reply: "Partially." One really got the feeling that the Minister was going through the motions, it being official Imbizo week, and hence expected of him to play, when he really didn't seem inclined to do so.

It also seems that the Minister is limiting his strokes, and either can't or won't hit the ball through the covers. Either the Minister of Finance, or Education, or Foreign Affairs, always somebody, is diligently keeping guard. Meaning we shouldn't really expect him to get past them, or should we? Many of us recognise the constraints of a junior ministry like Arts and Culture, but we do expect a Minister who is a senior figure in the ANC and a leading intellectual to at least test the Ministries that wield more power. Otherwise one can't help but wonder whether the Minister is simply buying time, waiting to get a real job.

Where I felt well and truly blocked was when I tried to bowl a bumper: does the Minister think that there has been enough transformation in the visual arts? Does he think we need an audit of transformation? I asked the same question at the last Imbizo and apparently the Minister has given it some thought. An audit, he enlightened us, would probably concentrate on who is showing in the galleries, and anecdotal evidence suggests that there is increased visibility of black artists. That seems to be good enough for the Minister. Try a second one: what about institutional transformation, and lingering euro-centrism? Don't underestimate the importance of increased black visibility in the galleries, young man! [2] Now I have no doubt that my IQ would be dwarfed by that of the Minister, but I don't get it that he doesn't seem to

get it, so let me try and step up the pace, hopefully hitting close enough to the boundary to at least trouble the sleeping fielders.

Who gives visibility to those artists? Curators. Then does it matter that our premier institution, the South African National Gallery, has employed at least four black trainee curators in the last ten years, and most of them never got the chance to curate anything? Does it matter that most other institutions have made more progress in training black curators than the SANG? Does it mean anything that the current curator in training is getting real opportunities to curate, but outside of the SANG? Does any of this unacceptably slow 'training' have to do with the fact that the head of the SANG was an apartheid era appointee, and hence dubiously qualified for the new dispensation? To what extent does she owe her survival to window dressing, misplaced affirmative action (definitely not 'corrective' in this case!), the absence of an organised visual arts lobby, and poor political leadership on arts and culture? Does it matter that the transformation of state institutions has been a closely guarded, poorly managed process that has created no real space for public participation? Does it matter that transformation has been confused with technocratic amalgamation of previously separate institutions? Why did a man with limited management experience get tasked with the integration of fifteen institutions? Why did a suitable candidate fail to get an interview? What do the top layers of Iziko management add in value to the performance of these institutions? Does it matter that it is still considered vitally important to go to Venice whereas virtually no-one (apart from captive students) showed up to hear the Director of the National Gallery of Zimbabwe talk about the *2nd Harare Biennale*? Does it matter that fear of alienating powerful individuals and jeopardising funding applications or career prospects contributes to an environment where real criticism seldom happens in public? Does any of this matter? No. No. No. [3]

There was only once when the Minister hit the ball to the boundary. Interestingly this was a question that had nothing to do with the visual arts – it had to do with a request for government support in retaining forests for male circumcision rites. The Minister challenged the person asking the question to adapt to changing circumstances. Notably he said that his reply was "an opinion". It was, in my view the only time he actually answered a question.

The horrors of the present lie in the realisation that, not only has the visual arts, unlike most other areas within arts and culture, been largely left to its own devices to transform itself, but the Minister appears to be satisfied that it has done (or is doing) a good job. The horrors of the present lie in the realisation that the current Minister may well be the best candidate arts and culture practitioners can hope for, and if he doesn't see the need to stomp the current gatekeepers of the visual arts then no other Minister will. Leaving the transformation of the visual arts to people in the sector is not an inspiring thought. I have to express amazement that not a single question for the Minister came from any of the office-bearers of the Visual Arts Network of South Africa. Hopefully this was not the case in other provinces. But then should one expect calls for change from the elite batting order (and those aspiring to become part of this class), or from perceived mavericks and dissidents who can see something more urgent to do than pass time in the sun?

Notes.

[1] In terms of current government practice an Imbizo is a public meeting between government representatives and “the people”. In this specific instance it was a meeting between the Minister of Arts and Culture Pallo Jordan and visual arts practitioners, and was held at the Goodhope Gallery, The Castle, Cape Town on 10 April 2006.

[2] The irony did not escape me that I was a lone voice in publicly challenging artists interviewed in Julie McGee and Vuyile Voyiya’s video documentary “The Luggage is Still Labelled: Blackness in South African Art” to acknowledge that some changes had taken place, particularly regarding the visibility of black artists. However few people would (or should) accept this increased visibility as evidence of sufficient transformation.

[3] I am aware that a lot can be said on these points, and that many people could contribute to such a process. At the Imbizo I questioned whether the Minister could make space for more substantial contributions than that which is possible in the context of a mass meeting. He dismissed my suggestion stating that the Imbizo was an adequate vehicle for public participation. In fact he questioned whether it had been necessary to hold a specific visual arts meeting, since only 15 people had questions for him. The fact that all the allocated time was used, that some of us had may well have had more questions or input to make, and that the previous years Imbizo at the Baxter Theatre only elicited one question concerning the visual arts (from myself and on the same issue) appear to be of no consequence. I have also tried on several occasions to get papers that I have written on aspects of the transformation of the visual arts to the Minister, and it is evident that he has not seen any reason to read them. But then why should he?