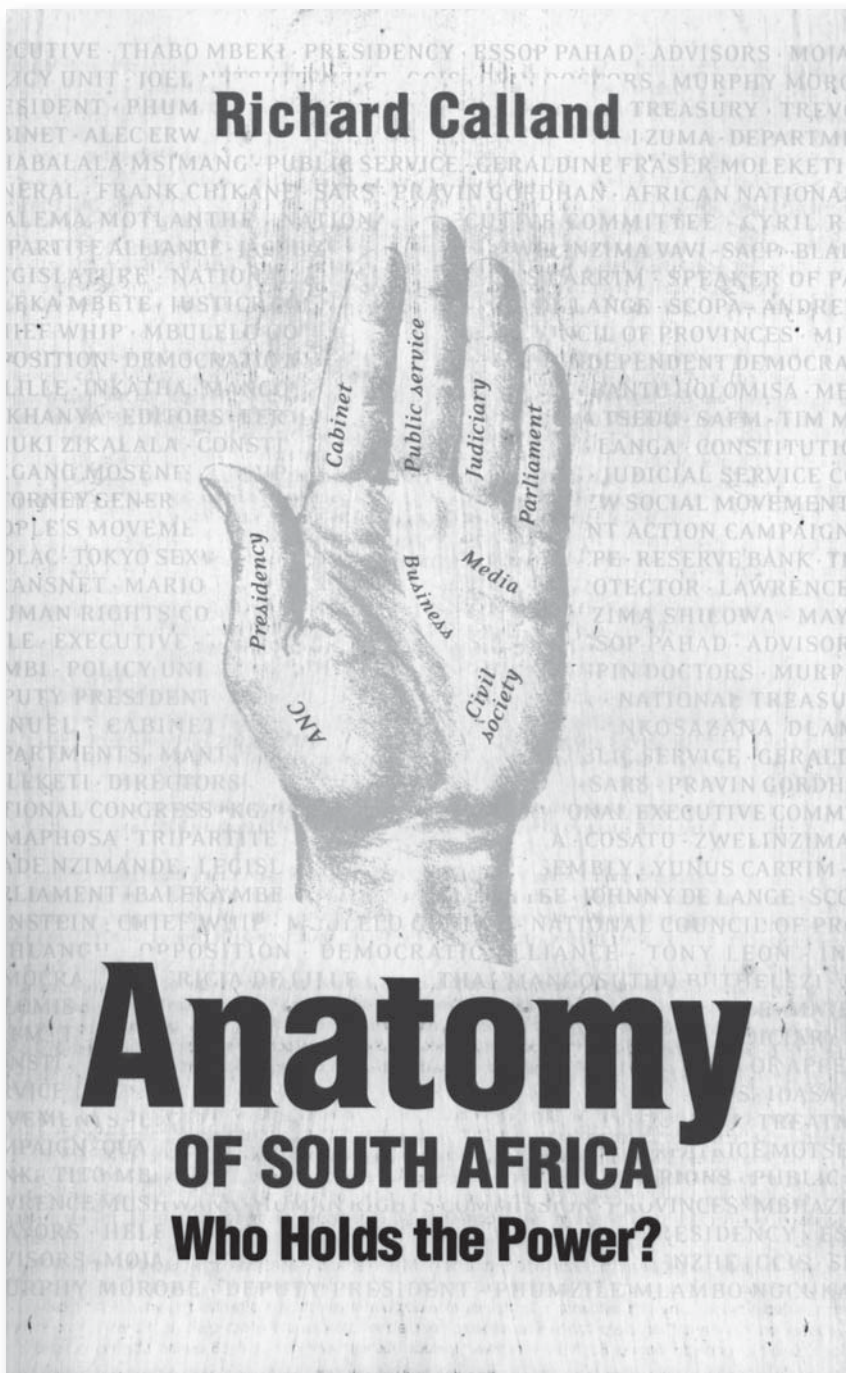


# Review

## *Anatomy of South Africa: Who holds the power?*

Richard Calland (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2006)

Reviewed by Sakhela Buhlungu



Richard Calland's *Anatomy of South Africa* is a welcome addition to the growing body of writing that seeks to make sense of developments we have witnessed since 1994.

In writing the book, Calland, a well-known political commentator in the media and author of important reports and books, drew on his extensive experience and networks as a researcher and political monitor based at the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA). His choice of topic is superb and timely. Following the demise of white minority rule, it is appropriate to ask the question, who holds the power in post-apartheid South Africa? The book scans the political landscape and focuses on the role of institutions and individuals in such diverse fields as the presidency, cabinet, the public service, parliament, political parties and the judiciary.

Modelled on Anthony Sampson's 1960s book titled *Anatomy of Britain*, the book seeks to take the reader beneath the surface and behind closed doors in the corridors of power in post-apartheid South Africa. If you want to know who comprises the inner circle that surrounds the president, the role of ministerial special advisors, the influence of government spokespersons and the politics of the judiciary, then you owe it to yourself to read this book. I found all the tables, particularly those on the gender and ethnic audits of ministers and deputy ministers, intriguing.

Calland goes to great lengths presenting the rationale for writing the book, and in this he comes across convincingly. In the preface he argues that “not a single ‘insider’ account of democratic government has emerged since 1994”. He contrasts this to Britain where top government officials document and publish their experiences the minute they leave office. On this point I expected the author to venture an explanation for this difference. Sadly, none was offered and by the time I finished the book, my frustration with lack of explanation had turned into a serious disappointment. This disappointment was fuelled by the fact that the book does not present any new information or facts. Many recent accounts, though not framed around the concept of power, have discussed virtually all the topics discussed in the book. In addition, over the last 13 years media reports have covered the same ground and more.

The aspect that would have made this an extremely profound account is sadly missing, namely, explaining why and how certain things and events happened. Why is Mojanku Gumbi, President Thabo Mbeki’s legal advisor such an influential figure in politics today? The same question could be asked of Joel Netshitenzhe. Is a social base, a constituency, an important element for a politician to become powerful? If yes, then how does one explain the influence of politicians with no obvious constituencies within and outside the ANC – Alec Erwin, Essop Pahad, etc?

I could not help feeling that Calland operates with a very narrow concept of power, that is, individuals who occupy top positions in key institutions of the state and its associated agencies. This is one of the main shortcomings of his book as it

leaves the reader with the incorrect notion that power only resides in the state. What about business, for example? In what ways is the very meaning of power changing in a globalising world?

Rather than discussing power solely in relation to individuals and state institutions, it would have been more fruitful to think of power as something that can be wielded through different institutions – state and non-state – and that there are certain circuits through which power is expressed and exercised. The institutions that Calland discusses are only some of these circuits, but there are many others (formal and informal) that are not discussed at all in the book. A fascinating phenomenon in post-1994 South Africa is the relationship between the world of politics and the world of business and how those connections provide avenues to exercise power.

The American sociologist, C. Wright Mills used the concept of a “power elite” to capture the connections between the different spheres within which power is exercised – politicians, business leaders, military leaders, top civil servants and trade union leaders.

Another omission in a book which discusses power is the question of how those that were in power before were displaced and where they are now. Surely, power does not simply change hands the day there is a political transition. Apart from a few cursory references to isolated instances of resistance, such as that of General Meiring not showing respect to a parliamentary committee chaired by Tony Yengeni, the book is silent on this subject.

The editing could have been better too. Some serious factual errors found their way into the final text:

- On page 142 Katishi Masemola and Danny-Boy Masemola are

listed as two people serving as general secretaries of FAWU and SAAPAWU respectively. In fact this is the same person who goes under different names and he is the general secretary of FAWU.

- On page 290 we are told that former minister of intelligence, Joe Nhlanhla, died in 2001. I do not think this is accurate. My recollection is that Nhlanhla was incapacitated by a severe stroke but he is still alive.
- On page 291 we are told that Membathisi Mdladlana was elected chairperson of SADTU in 1985. But SADTU was only formed in 1990!
- On page 293 it is stated that Alec Erwin served as national education officer of the National Union of Mineworkers from 1988 to 1993. Erwin never worked for the mineworkers union. He was in the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (Numsa).
- I’m not too sure about this, but I do not remember Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi getting elected as deputy chairperson of the SACP in 1988!

Overall, I found the book full of promise but I was disappointed in the end. In revising the book for the next edition, perhaps the author could consider framing the project as a sociology of power in post-apartheid South Africa. In this way the evolution of the different institutions – state and non-state – and the career trajectories of politicians, business people, judges, etc, could be used to illustrate the core arguments of the book. LB

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